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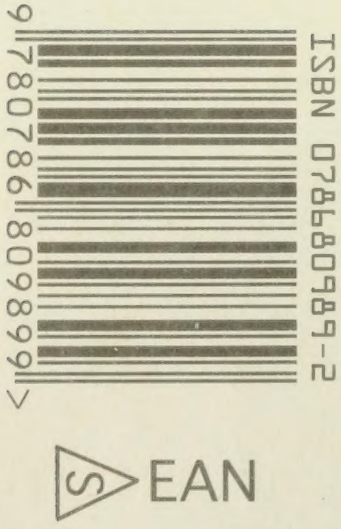

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For information address Hyperion Paperbacks for Children,
114 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10011-5690.

Printed in the United States of America

First Edition

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

This book is set in 13/17 New Baskerville.

ISBN 0-7868-0989-2

Visit www.spykids.com

AUG - - 2004

ADVENTURES
SPRING FEVER

Ah, the first day of spring! There's nothing like it—especially at the luxurious, cliff-top home of the Cortez family.

With the first ray of sunshine, Gregorio and Ingrid Cortez, along with their children, Carmen and Juni, went outside to seize the day in a big way.

After all, international superspies do *everything* in a big way.

And that's exactly what the Cortezes were—international spies. Though Gregorio, Ingrid, Carmen, and Juni Cortez appeared to be an ordinary family of four, in truth, they were agents for a secret government agency called the Office of Strategic Services. On their save-the-world missions, they had more adventures in a week than most people get in a lifetime. They could sense danger a mile away, and, as a result of their work, wars had been stopped before they'd even begun.

So, it was only natural that they approached

even ordinary pleasures, like this sunny, spring day, with an extra-creative sort of gusto.

Dad, for instance, was perched on top of a ladder, snipping at a topiary. The giant shrub was shaped to look like a flamenco dancer. As he trimmed the towering dancer's skirt, he got a little teary-eyed. Flamenco dancing reminded him of balmy nights in his homeland of Spain.

Mom—who was working on a garden plot in the topiary's shadow—spotted the teardrops on her husband's cheek. She stopped digging in the dirt for a moment.

"Don't be homesick, honey," she called up to Dad. "Remember those plants I cultivated in the greenhouse over the winter?"

"The cocoa bean–chili pepper hybrid, for making extra-easy mole sauce?" Dad asked, with a little sniffle.

"Uh-huh," Mom said. She held up a strange-looking branch dotted with tiny, creamy-brown peppers. "I'm planting them now. When the choco-chilies mature, I will make you a mole as good as your mama's, back in Madrid."

"Thank you, my darling," Dad replied, grinning at his wife through his tears. "You always make things better."

"Poor Dad," Carmen called out. *She* was in the center of their house's gracious front lawn, practicing her Tiki Tavi Do—a meditative yet kick-butt martial art that she'd made up all by herself. As she perfectly executed a pose called Stork Nibbling Fooglie Puffs, Carmen winked at her dad. "You're just so emotional," she said. "It's really cute."

"Cute?" Dad sputtered. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, but I am a dashing Spaniard and a cunning spy. I am *not* cute!"

"Hee-hee," Carmen giggled, looking at her mom. "Now, Dad's trying to be all macho. Even cuter!"

"Teenagers!" Dad grumbled, returning to his snipping. "I'm just glad your brother isn't a teenager yet, or the two of you would completely gang up on me."

Dad paused and gazed around the grounds.

"Hey," he wondered. "Where is my Junito, anyway?"

Mom, Dad, and Carmen looked around for the youngest Cortez. They couldn't see Juni anywhere. But they could hear him! Along with some decidedly strange noises!

Sproinnngggg!

"Wahooooo!" Juni cried, from somewhere off in the distance.

Sproinnngggg!

"Wahooooooo!"

The Spy Boy's happy howls seemed to be getting closer now.

SPPPPRROOOOOINNNNG!

With that last, mighty bounce, Juni suddenly came into view. He was rounding the corner of the Cortez house. Of course, "rounding the corner," in this case, meant curling up inside a big, *round* object! A giant, translucent, pink Sooperball! The springy sphere hurtled over the roof of the house, then bounced off the lawn with another tremendous *sprroinggggg*!

"Whoa!" Carmen cried. As Juni and his rubbery vehicle shook the earth, she fell out of her serene, Tiki Tavi Do pose. "What is that thing?"

"Whaaat?" Juni called as he bounced straight up into the air.

"Your sister was wondering about your, er, vehicle!" Dad called to Juni, as his son climbed down the ladder. "Frankly, I'm curious, too. Could you stop bouncing, just for a minute?"

"Sure, Dad!" Juni said, hitting a button at the base of his giant ball.

Sprrrroinggggg!

The sphere bounced again, but not as high this time.

Sproing-sproing-sproing-sproing.

Finally, with a series of little bounces, the contraption came to a rest. Juni tumbled dizzily out of a trapdoor at the ball's base. Then he gave his family a big grin.

"Lemme guess," Carmen said, hurrying over to inspect her brother's new toy. "Uncle Machete made this?"

"Who else?" Juni crowed. "That good ol' Uncle Machete just keeps getting smarter!"

"Oh, yes," Dad said with a wry smile, loping over to join his children. "My brother is indeed a great gadget inventor. But he can also be quite the blunderer! Is this thing safe, Juni?"

It was a legitimate question. After all, Uncle Machete's stunning spy gizmos were sometimes riddled with glitches. Juni still felt a little green every time he remembered the lizardy flavor of Uncle Machete's camouflaging Chameleocandy. *Or* the rosy cheeks and silly, blond curls Carmen had acquired when she'd tried his Dollface Pretty Potion.

But this test run of Uncle Machete's giant Sooperball had gone off without a hitch. So Juni nodded at his dad.

"That sphere is definitely sound," he declared,

pumping his fist in the air excitedly. "What's more, the Sooperball is a total ball! I haven't had so much fun since I rode the Juggler at Troublemaker Theme Park. Wahoo! Wa—wa—wa-choooo!"

"Whoa," Carmen said as Mom joined them, wiping dirt on her gardener's apron. "I guess the Sooperball really *is* fun!"

"That was no 'wahoo,'" Juni retorted, rubbing his nose with the back of his hand. "That was a sneeze, dorkus."

"In that case, bless you. . . . spaz!" Carmen shot back.

"Hey," Juni protested, rubbing his suddenly teary eyes. "Don't call me name—nam—na-CHOOOO!"

As Juni sniffled loudly, Mom put a sympathetic hand on his shoulder.

"Oh, honey," she sighed. "I forgot about your allergies! It's that time, isn't it?"

"Totally," Juni complained nasally. "Blooming flowers, green grass, pollen-bearing breezes—in short, spring—makes me miserable. Wa-CHOOOOO!"

"Say it, don't spray it," Carmen sneered as a gob of Juni's spit splattered on the side of the Sooperball.

"Now, Carmen," Mom chided. "Be nice to Juni. With his hay fever and allergies, he doesn't get to enjoy spring the way we do."

"Yeah!" Juni said, glaring at his sister with pink, swollen, watery eyes. "And furthermore . . . wa—wa—WA-CHOOOOOO!"

"Whoa!" Dad cried, jumping backward to avoid being hit by another spitball. "Uh . . . I can see you're suffering, son. Maybe you should take a little break from the outside world."

"Yeah, yeah," Juni grumbled with another sniff. "I know the drill. Go inside and be bored until the pollen passes. Why should this spring be different from any other?"

"Sorry, sweetie," Mom said. "But try to look at the bright side. With all the time you're not playing outside this spring, you can do some extra-credit homework and practice indoor spy maneuvers!"

"Oh, goody," Juni said sarcastically. "That sounds like a blast, Mom, but let's just file these allergies under the 'life's not fair' category and leave it at that."

With a sigh—and three more sneezes—Juni waved good-bye to his family and headed for shelter—specifically, his tree house. Whenever Juni was bummed, he retreated to that leafy haven. It had

everything a bummed-out boy could need: plenty of food, in a minifridge; a foozball table; a video-game-laden computer; and spy gadgets galore. Its picture window provided a killer view of blue skies and treetops. What's more, the tree house had been built by Uncle Machete out of totally tree-free materials, so the hideout didn't aggravate Juni's allergies.

Slumping over to the trunk of the tree, Juni stood for a moment in front of one of the knots in the bark. Suddenly, a small camera shot out of the whorl. It whirred up and down, carefully scrutinizing the Spy Boy.

"Name, please," a robotic voice, from a hidden speaker nearby, requested.

"Juni Rocket Racer Rebelde Cortez," Juni stated.

"Voice identification . . . verified," the voice said. "Enter."

A kid-sized doorway in the trunk suddenly whooshed open. Juni stepped into the tree's elevator and pressed a button marked OBSERVATORY.

In an instant, he was whisked up into the tree house's sunny lounge. Morosely, he headed for the pantry to seek solace in a snack. Within a few minutes, he'd constructed a towering sandwich of

chocolate spread, marshmallow fluff, and banana, with a few potato chips thrown in for crunch. But even the sugary and salty treat failed to cheer him up.

"No fair . . ." he grumbled, with his mouth full. ". . . Stupid allergies . . . never get to have fun . . . springtime . . . stinks. . . ."

As Juni crunched and complained, he glanced around the tree house. Suddenly, his eyes fell upon something that made him spit out a mouthful of crumbs.

"Of course!" he exclaimed, putting down his sandwich and jumping to his feet. "Why didn't I think of that before?"

He ran over to the object that had caught his eye—a white box mounted on the wall and painted with a Mexican juniper flower. The juniper was known for its medicinal qualities—and so were the contents of the box! It was Uncle Machete's medicine chest, filled with antidotes for every ailment. Juni threw open the door of the box and began pawing through the bottles and vials inside.

"Let's see," he murmured, peering at the label on one canister. "'Armadillo Armor, for the development of thick skin in the event of sibling rivalry.' Well, that'll definitely come in handy the next time

Carmen starts teasing me. But it's not what I need right now."

Juni kept looking. He passed over a tin of Mustachio Quick-Grow; a Pounding Headache Mallet; and a bee-sting balm that made a buzzing noise when Juni sniffed at it. Finally he happened across a small, brown bottle—with a skull and crossbones on the label! But underneath that sinister symbol was a smiley face and the title *Machete Cortez's Anti-Snot Serum.*

"Gross!" Juni said in delight. He read the attached note.

"Concocted from the de-poisoned venom of six different snake breeds, this reptilian remedy will snuff out your sneezes and stop your sniffles cold. Your bloodshot eyes will go clear and dry, and that tickle in your throat will be throttled. In other words—and this one's for you, Juni!—you'll be allergy-free. And don't worry. In my lab, I've rendered the snake venom almost assuredly, close-to-definitely, nonpoisonous. Enjoy the spring! Your loving uncle, Machete."

"Aw!" Juni said, placing a hand over his heart. "Uncle Machete milked venomous snakes for me. That's so nice!"

Juni poured some of the medicine into a little spoon that was attached to the bottle. The fluid

was an iridescent green and very exotic-looking.

Juni hesitated before swallowing the snaky stuff. As Dad had just pointed out, Uncle Machete didn't always get his recipes right. What if a trace of poison were still there?

Just in case, Juni got a bottle of snake-venom antidote from the medicine chest and placed it at his elbow. Then he took a deep breath—and downed the green liquid.

A moment later, Juni marched to one of the tree house's windows and threw it open. He leaned out into the balmy air and breathed deeply. He could almost see pollen specks and plant spores being sucked up through his nose! He braced himself for a big sneeze.

But . . . it never came.

Juni's sniffles seemed to have dried up, too. And his pink, watery eyes had become unblurred.

Juni's allergies were cured!

"Yay!" the Spy Boy cried. "Spring is mine! I'm sneeze-free. And I can see. I can even stop to smell the rose-*mmmpphhhg*."

Huh?

Juni was smelling as he'd never smelled before. His head was filled with the scents of flowers, sunbeams, and sweet, Pacific Ocean breezes.

Juni grabbed the Anti-Snot Serum bottle and stashed it in one of his cargo-pant pockets. Then he bounded over to the tree house elevator. With his allergies alleviated, he was ready to go outside and play.

CHAPTER 2

Juni zoomed out of the tree house elevator with a triumphant whoop. He rolled around on the freshly cut lawn. Then he ran to the rosebushes lining the house's driveway and took a deep whiff. Finally, he eyed a tall magnolia tree in the center of the grass. The tree was dotted with big, white blossoms.

"Ah," Juni said with a fiendish cackle. "My old nemesis, the magnolia. At last, we meet on equal terms."

Juni began stalking toward the tree. Rubbing his hands together, he said to it, "All my life I've wanted to climb you. But no! You've tormented me with those fragrant flowers and pollen-dusted branches. But, now, I've won! I will climb you to your highest branches. I will be the one Cortez who beats you!"

"Whoo-hoo!" someone cried.

Juni stopped in his tracks and looked around. That was definitely his dad's Spanish-accented voice. But where was it coming from?

"Look at me! I'm on top of the tree!"

"What?!" Juni sputtered. He ran to the base of the magnolia tree and peered up into its dense branches. Sure enough, among the leaves, there was his father, dangling by his knees from the highest branch!

"Dad!" Juni shouted. "What are you doing up there?"

"Having fun!" Dad chortled as he swung back and forth. "Wheee!"

Juni's mouth dropped open. He'd never seen his dad act like that before. The guy was the coolest spy in the world. He was all about dignity. He'd never climbed a tree in his life!

Juni was about to call out to his mother when a horrible sound filled the air.

"Youuuu are my sunshine," the voice (if you could call it that) screeched. *"My only sunshine! You make me happeeeeeeee, when skies are graaaaaaay!"*

Juni spun around. He gasped.

"Carmen?" he exclaimed. His sister was dancing in little circles on the lawn while singing into her cell phone!

"Uh, who are you torturing with that song?" Juni asked.

"Sssssshhh!" Carmen admonished Juni with a giggle. "I'm talking to Gary Giggles! Ahem . . . *You'll never know, deeaaaarrrrr, how much I looooove you. . . .*"

"This is too weird!" Juni muttered to himself. "The Carmen I know would die before admitting that she even like—liked Gary Giggles, much less treat him to a song and dance—literally!"

As the Spy Boy pondered his sister's behavior, some movement in his mother's garden caught his attention.

"Speaking of dance . . ." he whispered softly with wide eyes.

Mom was skipping, cartwheeling, and dancing all over her carefully arranged garden. With her bare toes, she was kicking up the carrots and trampling the choco-chili seedlings that she had grown especially for Dad.

"Hee-hee-hee," Mom giggled loopily. "Plants go bye-bye!"

That did it. Juni couldn't take anymore. He threw back his head and yelled, "Just what is going on here?"

As his shout echoed across the lawn, Mom stopped dancing. Carmen stopped singing. And

Dad stopped swinging. They all looked at Juni quizzically.

"Dude, lighten up," Dad called down to his son. "It's springtime. As in, fun time."

"Did you just call me . . . *dude*?" Juni sputtered. "Who are you, and what have you done with my oh-so-European dad?"

"Hee-hee," Dad giggled. "Juni made a joke."

"Okay," Juni declared to his flighty family. "Obviously, something weird happened to you while I was in the tree house. We've got to get to the bottom of it right . . . now?"

As he spoke, Juni glanced at his spy watch. He'd just gotten a new version of the Spy Kids' most crucial gizmo. In addition to being a walkie-talkie, a cell phone, and a satellite mapping system, it also told time! And the time flashing on Juni's watch at the moment was one fifty-five P.M.

"Uh, postpone that 'right now'!" Juni cried. "We've got a videoconference call with Devlin in five minutes!"

Devlin was the head of the OSS—which made him the spies' boss. He was dimple-cheeked, dashing, and very powerful. Today he was scheduled to give the Cortezes their annual employee review. If Devlin thought they'd done a good job all year, he

might give the spies a pay raise or jack up their security-clearance level. But if he was disappointed, that was when the spies were going to hear about it. It was a high-stakes phone call! And the call couldn't have come at a worse time.

"A videoconference call?" Carmen asked, skipping over to Juni. "That would require going inside. *Bo*-ring! I have a better idea. I'll just call Devlin from here!"

Carmen cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted, "Mr. *Dev*-lin! Yoo-hoo! Dev! Are you out there?"

"Devlin!" Mom called into the air, wiggling her toes in the dirt.

"Hey, Devlin!" Dad yelled from his tree.

Then the three goofy Cortezes cocked their ears and listened. They were met with silence.

Dad shrugged. "Devlin must not be home!" he babbled. "Oh, well. That just means more playtime for us!"

"Ugh!" Juni huffed as Mom, Dad, and Carmen resumed their goofy shenanigans. "Well, I guess they're in no shape to face the big man, anyway. I'll just take the call myself. Maybe Devlin can help me figure out what's going on here."

Juni trotted into the house and up to his

parents' bedroom. He seated himself at his mother's makeup table.

"Let's see," he murmured as he surveyed the array of lipsticks, lotions, and potions. "I think it was the blue eye shadow, the pink blush, and then the green eye shadow."

In that order, Juni pressed down on the pots of makeup. Of course, this was no beauty ritual. Those little containers were actually cleverly disguised computer buttons!

When Juni finished typing in the secret code, Mom's makeup mirror suddenly transformed itself into a computer screen. On that screen—alongside a glowing stream of ever-shifting data—was a woman sitting behind a desk. It was Devlin's secretary, Miss Manju. Nobody could speak to Devlin without her permission. Not even the president of the United States! Miss Manju wore her long, dark hair in a severe bun. Her penetrating, brown eyes were rimmed with severe, black eyeliner.

Like any sensible Spy Kid, Juni found her terrifying.

He braced himself and squeaked, "Hello, Miss Manju. How are you today?"

Normally, the surly secretary would have snapped something like, "A ewe is a sheep, boy.

Now quit wasting my time, and tell me what you want."

But not today. Today, Miss Manju seemed . . . different! In fact, she looked like an Indian goddess! She'd taken down her long hair and put on a beautiful, pink-and-green sari. Little pots of incense were burning at her elbows and her legs were crossed in a lotus pose. Gazing at Juni from beneath the sparkly jewel glued to her forehead, she smiled serenely.

"Hello, Agent Cortez," she trilled. "Isn't the universe just oozing with love today? Can't you just feel it?"

Juni stared.

"Uh, Miss Manju?" he said. "This is a side of you I haven't seen before!"

"Oh, I know," the secretary replied dreamily. "I was too caught up in meeting-filled calendars; reports and briefs; and stressful confrontations. But now, I've seen the light. From here on out, I'm just going to let life flow over me, like a river polishing a beautiful stone!"

To emphasize her point, Miss Manju fluttered her henna-tattooed hands around her head and smiled giddily.

"Looks like my family members aren't the only

ones who've gone goofy," Juni murmured to himself. Sighing, he raised his voice and said, "Uh, life . . . flowing . . . that's really great, Miss Manju. But could I talk to Mr. Devlin, please? We have a two-o'clock appointment."

"Appointments are so . . . rigid, don't you think?" Miss Manju said. "I think you'd do better to just listen to your inner self. Your heart will tell you when it's the right time to speak to Mr. Devlin, Juni."

"Okay . . . well, my heart is thinking right about now!" Juni said, with a slight note of irritation in his voice.

"Oooh, you're angry," Miss Manju said. "Why don't you have yourself a nice cup of herbal tea? Cleanse your spirit a little. And then maybe the universe will see fit to connect your call. Bye-bye, now!"

As she reached to disconnect Juni, Miss Manju hummed a little tune. The screen went blank.

"Has the world gone crazy?" Juni exclaimed, jumping out of his mom's vanity chair. He stomped downstairs to the kitchen, scowling and grumbling. When he arrived, though, his frown morphed into a shocked stare.

His parents were sitting cross-legged on the kitchen counter—with their shoes on! What's

more, they were munching on Cheez Kurls and raw cookie dough.

"What is going on?" Juni cried. "You guys *hate* junk food. You're like the whole-wheat wonder twins!"

"Whole wheat?" Mom said, spraying bright-orange crumbs on herself and the floor. "Um, if it doesn't come with some artificial flavor or coloring, I want nothing to do with it!"

"Tscha!" Dad guffawed. He took a swig from a bottle of bright, blue Kewl Punch.

Meanwhile, Carmen had put on some ridiculous striped tights and tie-dyed shorts. She was stringing a rope across the kitchen to do a little indoor tightrope-walking.

Juni's flaky family was really freaking him out!

"I've got to get to the bottom of this," he whispered to himself. "And if I can't get Mom, Dad, and Carmen's help, I've got to turn to my *other* family—the OSS. I've *gotta* get through to Devlin!"

CHAPTER 3

Leaving his parents and Carmen to their addled activities, Juni slipped out of the kitchen and into the garage. He grabbed the closest, fastest vehicle he could find—his rocket-powered razor scooter. With his combat-booted foot, he cranked the ignition lever, and flames burst out of the scooter's tailpipe. Juni was off!

He zipped down the driveway and began scooting toward OSS headquarters. He was zipping along, glaring at the road ahead of him, intent only on his crucial destination, until . . . something caught his eye. Juni slowed down to take a look. His mouth fell open in disbelief.

A bunch of businessmen—the kind who went to work every day in harsh suits and wing tip shoes—had gathered outside their office building. They'd each taken off their ties and knotted them all together. They were using the long string of ties as

a jump rope! The portly adults hopped over their silken rope, chanting happily.

Shaking his head in bewilderment, Juni slowly scooted on. As he went, he saw other curiosities: teachers playing hopscotch; firefighters wailing into a karaoke microphone atop their truck; teenagers dancing in crosswalks and swinging from street signs instead of scowling or being surly.

When Juni had seen all he could stand, he sped his scooter up. The world seemed to have gone mad! He had to get to Headquarters—now.

Devlin will know what to do, Juni told himself as he scooted. After all, he is every spy's voice of reason and sanity.

At last, Juni pulled into the driveway of Headquarters with a sigh of relief. He stopped before a huge, steel wall. Embedded in the wall was a tall, missile-shaped closet. It was the All Points Security Clearance Station. Juni stepped inside the enclosure. Immediately, its door snapped shut. Clamps erupted from several holes in the station walls and secured his arms, legs, and head.

"Okay, you got me." Juni scowled at a speaker on the wall. "Can we make this quick, please?"

"Whatever," a robotic voice replied. "You know the drill. OSS Headquarters is the most secure

building in the world. Nobody is exempt from our rigorous security measures. Not even you, Agent Cortez. Now . . . name, please?"

"You just said it," Juni sputtered.

"I repeat—whatever!" the speaker answered. "Name, please?"

Sighing, Juni rattled off his many names. Then he held still while a tiny scope whirred out of a niche and blasted his eye with a beam of light.

"Voice recognition and eyeball scan—verified," the voice said. "Administering hair-follicle extraction and tickle test, now."

Juni winced as yet another robotic arm plucked one of his curly, red hairs for analysis, and then poked him at the most ticklish spot on his body—a dime-sized point right behind his knee. After Juni had collapsed in giggles, the speaker said drily, "Identification complete. Security clearance—granted. Proceed."

"Thanks," Juni grumbled. With a loud hum, the station rotated in the wall. Then the door whizzed open, and Juni stepped out. He was now inside the OSS walls. Stashing his razor scooter in the parking lot, Juni began to rush toward the building. He was determined to get past Miss Manju to see Devlin.

In fact, his determination so distracted him that

he almost ran smack-dab into someone who was rushing *out* of the building. That someone was Devlin! And Devlin was looking extremely un-Devlinish, indeed. The boss's usually impeccable salt-and-pepper hair had been shaped into boyish spikes. Covering his brown eyes was a pair of goofy swim goggles. And on his feet? Big, floppy flippers!

"Uh, going somewhere, Mr. Devlin?" Juni asked carefully. "An underwater mission, perhaps?"

"Mission, schmission!" Devlin crowed, waving Juni out of his way. "I'm going on vacation! Fee, fi, fo, fum, isle of Fiji, here I come!"

Devlin began tromping to his car, his flippers slapping the pavement loudly with each step.

"But, Mr. Devlin!" Juni protested, running after his boss. "Who's gonna worry about the fate of the world—not to mention your army of spies—while you're having your fun?"

"What's the phrase you kiddies use?" Devlin said. "Oh, right. What-*ever*!"

"Please, don't go yet!" Juni squeaked. "There's something I've gotta tell you. Something import—"

Devlin waddled over to his car and hopped inside.

"But—but—" Juni protested.

"See ya," Devlin sang. "Wouldn't wanna be ya!"

He cranked up his engine and peeled out of the parking lot.

As Juni watched him go, his blood ran cold. Diego Devlin was the only grown-up, besides his parents, that Juni could count on through thick and thin. And now, Devlin had gone nutty.

"What do I do?" Juni whispered. "What-do-I-do, what-do-I-do, what-do-I-do?"

As Juni panicked, a voice suddenly echoed through his head. It was his sister's voice! She was saying exactly what she would have said if she had been there—and sane—right at that moment.

What's with the drama? Carmen was demanding of her brother. *You know what to do. Spy! Now, get going!*

"Oh, no," Juni murmured to his phantom sister. "You don't get off that easy. When I spy, it's with a partner. And that partner is you! I don't care how goofy you've gotten. I'm coming home to find you. And we're gonna get to the bottom of this thing!"

Moments later, Juni and his rocket-powered razor scooter were back on the road. He was driving so fast he barely noticed the goofy shenanigans going on all over town.

But one thing he couldn't miss was the flashing of blue lights—right behind him!

"Rats!" Juni cried as he pulled over to the side of the road. "Of all the times to be caught speeding!"

A very tall, very burly, police officer dismounted his motorcycle and began walking over. Juni peered at the man in his rearview mirror and gulped. The man did *not* look amused.

Juni quickly reviewed the available tactics.

He could play dumb: "What? You mean razor scooters aren't allowed to go fifty-six miles per hour on a residential street? I had no idea, officer!"

He could play the boy in distress and cry his heart out to the guy.

Or . . . he could just pull rank!

The last choice was definitely the most dignified of the three. And after all the loopiness he'd been witnessing, Juni had quite a craving for dignity. So he put on a stern, rock-jawed expression to greet the policeman.

"Hello, officer," he growled.

"Son," the officer replied, "do you know how fast you were going on that thing?"

"I know exactly how fast I was going," Juni fibbed. "And so do my bosses at the Office of Strategic Services. I'll have you know—I'm on official

spy business. I've got to be on my way, ASAP."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," the officer scoffed. "I've heard it all before. 'I'm a presidential bodyguard, and the motorcade's leaving without me!' Or, 'My wife is about to deliver twins! Never mind how thin she looks!'"

"But," Juni squeaked, "it's true! I'm a spy!"

"Got some I.D. to prove it?" the policeman challenged.

"Of course," Juni said. Then he put a finger to his chin. Where *had* he put his I.D. card? Looking down at the thirteen pockets on his cargo–pant legs, Juni sighed. Then he began patting each pocket, feeling around for the little card.

With each slap at his pants, Juni noticed that a little cloud of yellowish dust billowed off the fabric.

Whoa, Juni thought. Guess I got a little grungy when I was playing with the Sooperball before.

But, Juni was a kid. He wasn't bothered by a little dirt. So he just shrugged and kept on searching.

He waded through all his wares, sifting through dozens of gadgets, soccer-star trading cards, and forgotten pieces of candy. Finally he located his I.D. card in the lowest-right calf pocket. With a triumphant, haughty look, he turned to the policeman. . . . and gasped!

During the twenty seconds Juni's back had been turned, the serious officer of the law had morphed into a giggly, googly-eyed spaz! He was slapping his hands together, then slapping his legs.

"C'mon!" he urged the befuddled Spy Boy. "Join in! *Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack . . .*"

"This is so whack, whack, whack!" Juni cried. "Listen, Officer, I've gotta get home."

"Ta-ta!" trilled the police officer. He'd completely forgotten about Juni's traffic violation. He headed back to his motorcycle, still clapping and slapping away. He looked as though he were having the time of his life.

"I wish I was having that much fun," Juni grumbled, as he fired up his scooter once again.

Heaving a sigh, Juni resumed his ride home and rushed into the Cortez kitchen. When he saw what was waiting for him there, he recoiled in horror.

Mom and Dad had moved off the kitchen counter and onto the Mexican-tiled floor. They sat facing each other. Between them was an empty soda bottle.

"Your turn, Ingrid," Dad was saying.

Mom reached out and spun the bottle. When it petered to a halt, its neck was pointing right at Dad's smiling face.

"It hit you *again*!" Mom exclaimed, delightedly. "C'mere, you!"

Then Mom leaned over and gave Dad a big kiss!

"Eww!" Juni cried, clutching his stomach. "Mom, Dad. There's a kid on the premises! Eww! Stop!"

Usually, when Carmen and Juni protested Mom and Dad's public displays of affection, their parents sheepishly unlocked their lips. But today, they didn't even seem to notice their grossed-out son. They just kept right on smooching, giggling away between kisses.

"Yuck!" Juni yelled. "I'm outta here!"

Juni shielded his eyes and dashed across the kitchen. He ran up the back stairs.

"Carmen!" he yelled, darting down the hallway. "Where are you?"

There was no answer. But there *was* some incredibly loud, punk music emanating from his parents' bedroom. Juni hurried toward the tunes. Bursting through his parents' bedroom door, he saw Carmen, sitting at his mother's makeup mirror.

"Whew!" Juni sighed in relief. "Carmen must have come to her senses. She's probably hacking into Headquarters's computer right now."

But his relief vanished immediately.

Carmen was bouncing to the thrashing music and painting smudges of black makeup around her eyes! Her lips were blackened, too. And her dark, wavy hair had been coiled into crunchy twists. She looked mega-Goth.

"Heeeey," she drawled to her brother as she finished making up her eyes. Then she picked up a bottle of "Bruise" nail polish and attacked her fingernails.

"C'mon, Carmen," Juni said, grabbing his partner's elbow. "We've got a new mission. I don't know exactly what that mission *is* yet, but we've got one."

"Maybe *you* do," Carmen retorted. "*I*, on the other hand, am all about anarchy."

"Ex-squeeze me?" Juni sputtered. "Anarchy?"

"Yeah!" Carmen said, nodding to the music. "I'm rejecting authority. I'm punk'd, see?"

There's no reasoning with Carmen, Juni suddenly realized. She's just as wiggy as everyone else. I'm gonna have to fight this battle alone—with my spy skills!

So, Juni changed his tune. Gazing over at his blackened-eyed sister, he nodded in mock approval.

"Yeah, yeah," he said sneakily. "I see what you

mean, Carmen. Anarchy. That's completely cool. But now there's something *you've* gotta see."

"What?" Carmen wondered suspiciously.

"It's out that window," Juni said, pointing across the bedroom. Through the open window was a breathtaking view of the ocean. "Go check it out."

Shrugging, Carmen stood up and went to the window.

"What? I don't see anything," she said as she peered out at the sweet, spring sky.

"Just wait!" Juni cried. Then he ran up behind his sister and gave her a big push!

"Whaaaaaaa!" Carmen screamed as she plummeted out the window. Her arms flapped in the wind, and her punked-out twists of hair unraveled.

High above her, Juni leaned out of the window and watched his sister fall. Had Juni suddenly gone wiggy, too? With disastrous results?

Nah! He had a plan all worked out for Carmen's little tumble. And it began with the universal remote control in his spy watch! Swiftly, Juni punched one of the watch's buttons, causing a tiny joystick to pop out of the gadget's side. Juni grabbed it and started wiggling.

Instantly, the green grassy ground just beneath Carmen began rumbling.

Then it shuddered wildly.

And then it opened up completely! As grass and dirt flew in all directions, a giant, round basket made of gleaming, white plastic flew out of the

ground. It was supported by a sturdy post, which was steadily extending itself up, up, upward.

Guided by Juni's joystick, the basket shifted left. Then, a smidgen to the right. Finally, Juni had it in just the right place to scoop Carmen out of the air!

The Spy Girl was so shocked by the save, she simply lay on the basket's floor, gasping for breath. Juni raised the odd container to his window. It was about six feet across, with a waist-high rim—just big enough to hold two Spy Kids.

Juni stepped into the basket and sat down next to his sister. Then he braced himself. He was *sure* Carmen would punish him for pulling such a fast one on her.

Instead, she seemed delighted!

"Again, again!" she cried, clapping her hands. "That was fun! Like a roller-coaster ride. What's this thing we're on? A parachute launch? A ladder to the moon?"

"You know what it is," Juni said, shaking his head. "It's the Quick-Grow Crow's Nest. Uncle Machete installed it in our underground storage unit for sky-high surveillance. It's a spy tool, *not* a joyride."

"That's what you think!" Carmen said. She looped her elbows over the rim of the basket and

gazed down at the Cortez grounds. "*I* think we should take it higher!"

Mischievously, Carmen reached for the Crow's Nest's control panel and pushed the ASCEND button with a sly grin.

It was a move Juni agreed with—for once! He nodded as the post of the Crow's Nest began to extend again.

"I think we need to get about a half mile up to complete our research," he said seriously. He typed a few coordinates into the control panel. The Crow's Nest began to crank upward at a faster clip.

"Whoooo!" Carmen hollered. "Look at me! I'm flying! Whoooooo!"

"Oh, man," Juni said, gaping at his spacy sister. "I should have thought to bring the digital video camera. If I taped you acting like this, I'd have enough blackmail to last me the rest of our lives!"

"Tee-hee!" Carmen giggled obliviously.

Normally, Juni would have been thrilled to have such an easygoing sib. After all, Carmen was usually the one reprimanding *him* for acting goofy or gross.

But this turnaround was disturbing. Especially when the Spy Kids clearly had save-the-world work to do. Juni had never felt so alone!

Whiiiirrrrr-CHUNK!

Juni was jolted out of his self-pity party. The Crow's Nest had just shuddered to a halt! Juni looked out over the basket's rim. Yup—he and Carmen were swaying a half mile up in the air. It was time to stop brooding and start spying.

"Okay," Juni said as he began pushing buttons on the Crow's Nest control panel. "I'm going to activate the Golden Rule Monitor."

"Golden!" Carmen responded, pointing at the bright sun. "Awesome!"

"Yeah, yeah," Juni sighed, shaking his head again. "Listen—as you *used* to know, the Golden Rule Monitor can detect concentrations of various kinds of behavior, from criminal to immoral to devious. It's a great gizmo for spotting gangs of evildoers."

Carmen didn't answer Juni. She had pulled out a compact and begun touching up her black eye makeup.

"Why do I even try?" Juni muttered. He turned his back on his silly sister and got to work by himself. Aiming the behavior-seeking dial at LAZY, he activated the Golden Rule Monitor.

Immediately, a long, robotic arm, tipped by a wide, white satellite dish, grew out of the base of

the Crow's Nest. The dish began buzzing and circling the Crow's Nest, searching for lazy behavior in every direction. As the dish scanned the region, Juni stared eagerly at the control panel, waiting for data.

After a couple of minutes, a stream of information flashed onto the screen. As he read the data, Juni felt himself go weak.

"Whoa!" he said, still staring at the screen. "The world hasn't gone goofy, yet. But our town sure has! For a radius of four-point-two miles, almost *everybody* is acting as loopy as you, Carmen! Uh . . . Carmen?"

When his sister didn't respond, Juni pulled his gaze away from the computer. Then he gaped at Carmen's seat. It was empty!

"Oh, she swings through the air, with the greatest of eeeeeaaaase," Carmen's voice sang out. *"The daring young girl on the flying trapeeeeeze."*

"Carmennnnnn!" Juni cried. Feeling dread take his breath away, he sidled to the side of the Crow's Nest and peeked over its rim. Sure enough, Carmen was dangling in the air like an overgrown—and wingless—bird! She'd hooked her belt buckle to an anchoring ring on the side of the Crow's Nest. Now, with one hand grasping the

belt's other end, she was twisting, turning, and somersaulting in midair!

"Get back in here!" Juni bellowed.

Carmen, of course, ignored him.

"That does it!" Juni yelled. "Carmen Cortez, it's time for some tough love!"

With that, Juni raised his fist. Encircling his wrist, just below his spy watch, was the other gadget the Spy Kids never left home without—the Machete Cortez Elastic Wonder. In other words—a rubber band. But a superlong and powerful one!

Juni began swinging the rubber band over his head like a lasso. As the bouncy loop whirled above him, he watched his sister swoop through the air.

He tracked her trajectory.

He calculated her velocity with a sophisticated spy calculation.

Then he held his breath. Gripping one end of the elastic wonder, Juni threw the other end toward his sister.

The rubber band looped itself around Carmen's ankle and tightened. He had lassoed her! Then, with a precise flick of his wrist, Juni hauled Carmen back into the Quick-Grow Crow's Nest.

"Hey . . ." Carmen began to complain. But Juni held up his hand.

"Just. Don't. Speak," he said, through gritted teeth.

"Oh, are ya mad?" Carmen taunted her brother. She grinned and put up her dukes. "You want to fight about it? Huh? Huh?"

"As a matter of fact," Juni retorted, "I do! You just gave me a great idea!"

Juni reached into a long, narrow pocket of his cargo pants. He extracted an aerosol can.

"Hair spray?" Carmen guffawed. "Oooh, I'm scared."

Juni yearned to make a sarcastic retort. Instead, he decided to let his gadget speak for itself. He aimed the can at Carmen's face and spritzed. A cloud of blue-gray dust emerged from the nozzle.

Carmen batted at the cloud with her hand, but there was no avoiding it. She sucked in a big whiff.

And then . . . she burst into tears!

"Whoa!" Juni said as Carmen sank sobbing to the Crow's Nest floor. "This stuff really works!"

He peered at the label on the can. *You've tried sticks and stones and even name-calling, but your foe is still on the go?* the label read. *Try KnockDownDragOut, when you* really *need to kill the mood!*

"Boooo-hoooo-hoooo!" Carmen wailed.

"Uh . . . maybe I overdid it a little bit," Juni muttered. As his sister sobbed, he squirmed and patted her shoulder awkwardly. As he did, he noticed a bit of yellow dust billowing off Carmen's punk outfit.

"Uh, I guess you got kinda dirty playing outside, too," Juni said uncomfortably. "Remember how fun that was, Carmen? So, uh, cheer up, okay?"

Juni, of course, expected nothing to come of this comfort. In his experience, the only thing that stopped a girl from crying was a call from a boy, or a new sweater, or something like that.

But the day was just full of surprises! A moment after he'd spoken, Carmen's tears completely dried up! She began giggling again. Then she started laughing out loud.

She'd become fully goofy again!

"Wait a minute . . ." Juni said suspiciously. He gave Carmen's sleeve another pat. A puff of yellow dust clouded the air again.

"Whaaaaa, haaaaa, haaaaa!" Carmen guffawed, collapsing onto the floor of the Crow's Nest.

"It's the dust!" Juni cried, jumping to his feet and gazing down at his dirty clothes. "That's what made the police officer go all goofy. And you, too! It's some sort of . . . happy dust! But where's it coming from?"

Carmen, of course, couldn't respond amid all her laughter. Leaving her to her giggles, Juni turned back to his computer. On the screen was a map of his town, with the goofiness-infected area shaded in neon green. Suddenly, Juni noticed something. The green spot was circular—an almost perfect circle, in fact. And inch by inch, that circle was growing larger.

"The giddiness is moving outward. So, the source of this happy dust has got to be smack-dab in the middle of this circle!" Juni cried happily. "All I have to do is find that spot. A simple geometry equation should do it!"

An instant after making that triumphant deduction, Juni's shoulders sagged.

"I'm only in the fifth grade!" he moaned. "I don't know geometry. That's Carmen's area!"

"Hee-hee-hee!" Carmen giggled loudly from the floor of the Crow's Nest. "Juni doesn't know a hypotenuse from a hippo!"

"You . . . you . . ." Juni sputtered. When words failed him, he simply spritzed his sister with another dose of KnockDownDragOut.

"Hey," Carmen cried out in annoyance, before bursting into tears again.

"Hmmm," Juni said slyly.

He patted Carmen's sleeve very gently. A small puff of happy dust wafted beneath her nose, and she began laughing—but more softly than before.

Juni gave her a swig of Uncle Machete's Anti-Snot Serum.

She shook her head in confusion, then gazed at her brother.

"Uh . . . what happened?" she asked.

"Oh, don't worry. You'll hear alllll about it," Juni assured her, "*after* you do a little math problem. You've got to find the *x* that marks the spot behind this mystery. And then *we're* going to start spying!"

It took Carmen—the back-to-normal-and-sharp-as-a-tack Carmen—mere seconds to pinpoint the exact center of the circle of goofiness.

"It looks like a remote, wooded area about five miles away," she said, squinting at the screen.

"Let's go," Juni said, hitting the DESCEND button on the Quick-Grow Crow's Nest. "We'll take the Leap Frog."

Nodding in agreement, Carmen hopped out of the Crow's Nest the moment it hit the ground. Then she stalked toward the garage with Juni in tow. As she passed the kitchen window, though, something made her pause. It was the sound of giggling.

And oldies dance music.

Peeking through the window, Carmen saw her parents jitterbugging on top of the kitchen table, breaking lightbulbs on the antique chandelier with every swing of their flailing arms.

"Whoa!" Carmen breathed. "Mom and Dad have

completely lost it! Please tell me I wasn't acting that silly."

"Okay," Juni said obediently. "You weren't acting that silly."

"Whew," Carmen sighed in relief.

"You were *worse*," Juni said smugly, pointing at Carmen's face. Confused, Carmen glanced at her reflection in the window. She gasped at her black lipstick, smudged eyes, and gel-slathered hair. It was a pretty horrific sight.

"Nobody," she declared, "cons me into utter indignity and gets away with it. We're getting to the bottom of this!"

"Like I've only been saying for the past hour," Juni muttered. At the same time, he couldn't help grinning. He was more psyched to have his partner back than he wanted to admit.

The Spy Kids went into the Cortezes' large and packed garage. They surveyed the various family vehicles: Juni's razor scooter; their parents' sport-utility vehicle; their submarine, outfitted with a titanium drill (for boring into the bedrock of hostile lands); and the giant, bouncy Jumping Jack Flash.

They paused before a small, green, triangular pod. It was outfitted with bulbous twin windshields.

Sprouting from both sides were two very long, hinged, hind legs and two shorter front legs. Attached to the bottom of the legs were hardy, squat tires. The vehicle looked like a giant, robotic frog.

"Perfect," Carmen said as they clambered up into the compact body. Carmen strapped herself into the driver's seat and pressed a few buttons on the dashboard. A bright green control panel lit up with several whirs, a few chimes, and a couple of croaks.

Ribbit, ribbit!

"What's that noise?" Juni cried, jumping in his seat.

"It's the Leap Frog," Carmen said. "It's telling you to buckle your seat belt."

"Oh," Juni said, clicking a rubbery, green belt over his waist. "Okay, let's go!"

Carmen steered the Leap Frog out of the garage and down the driveway. She began driving toward the coordinates she'd discovered earlier, steering the vehicle carefully.

"Okay, keep your eyes peeled," she ordered her brother as they traveled. "You never know what we might hit along the way."

"I do!" Juni shrieked, pointing through the

windshield. "Goofy, dust-addled drivers. Look out!"

Juni was right. Up ahead of the Leap Frog, one car was darting through a red light. Another was making a right turn out of the left-turn-only lane.

"Whoa!" Carmen cried. She lunged for the Leap Frog's control panel and hit a button marked HOP.

With a grinding noise, the frog's hinged back legs sprang into action—literally. The Spy Kids found themselves vaulting up and over the out-of-control cars. In fact, they scaled the intersection completely! They landed safely on the other side of the traffic light and continued driving.

"Cool!" Juni yelled, pumping his fist.

"Don't celebrate yet!" Carmen cried, reaching for the HOP button again. "There's a double-parker up ahead!"

Sprroiiiing!

And so the Spy Kids hopped, skipped, and jumped their way across town until they reached a dead end—a dirt road culminating in a thicket of trees and bushes. Climbing out of the bouncy Leap Frog, the kids looked around.

"All I see is greenery," Juni said. "No evil chemical factory. No villain's secret hideout. Nothing!"

"You're right," Carmen said with a sigh. "Well, back to the drawing board."

"Speaking of drawing," Juni said, pointing suddenly to a nearby tree, "check out that super-weird piece of art!"

Carmen followed her brother's gaze and squinted at a rusty scrap of tin tacked to the trunk of the tree. Etched into the metal was a cartoon of a woman, with cat ears protruding from her big, bouffant hairdo. The image was mawkish and mesmerizing at the same time. Carmen couldn't resist walking up for a closer look.

Lightly, she touched the cartoon woman's rusty cheek.

The moment she did, the tree branches around her began to rustle.

Then the air filled with a dull rumbling.

And then the trees and bushes began to move! They shuddered and shifted until a low doorway opened up in the thick branches. When Carmen peered through it, she couldn't believe her eyes.

"Juni, check it out!" she cried over her shoulder. "It's a huge secret garden!"

The Spy Boy ran over to join his sister. As he peeked through the leafy doorway, Juni's eyes bugged out. He was staring into the most cluttered, chaotic, and magical landscape he'd ever seen!

There was a glinting gate made of spoons,

knives, and forks, welded together and set on clothespin hinges. Just next to the gate was a rusty, old mailbox. *Ed N. Falls* was scrawled on the box in faded, chipped paint.

The spies stepped gingerly through the gate. Before them was a series of walkways. One was made of marbles embedded in cement. Another was made of Popsicle sticks stuck into blue caulk and arranged to form a long comic strip about a dog with a squirrel's tail. Above the walkways was a suspension bridge with ropes woven from fragrant, minty, dental floss.

The paths led to a series of structures, each more bizarre than the last—a leaning tower of peanut-butter jars filled with colored liquid; a giant rubber doughnut with a hammock suspended in its hole; a house shaped like a tuba; a reproduction of the Roman Coliseum constructed entirely out of paper clips.

Surrounding all of these buildings were whimsical sculptures of preening mermaids and singing snakes.

All of these pieces of art were nestled among a variety of tropical trees, cleverly carved shrubs, curlicued vines, and frenetic flower beds.

"Whoa!" Juni breathed as the kids walked

through the garden's convoluted corridors. "This must have taken decades to build. Do you think the guy on the mailbox—Ed N. Falls—did it all?"

"That's what I'd like to find out," Carmen answered, peering around the garden. "I wonder where Mr. Falls is now. All these buildings seem to be empty. In fact, the whole place looks pretty overgrown and abandoned."

"Abandoned?" Juni quavered. "Or in trouble? If this is the epicenter of that goofy dust, this Falls guy could be giggling himself into a stupor right now!"

"You're right," Carmen said, picking up her pace. She snooped around a fountain gushing purple water and then hopped over a fence made of rubber bands, searching for signs of life.

Meanwhile, Juni cupped his hands around his mouth and started yelling.

"Hello?" he called. "Mr. Falls? Anybody? Come out, come out, wherever you are. We're here to help!"

The kids held their breath and waited. But they heard no response beyond the burbling of fountains and rustling of tree leaves.

The rustling of one tree in particular caught Carmen's attention. It bisected a path right in front of her. It was also the strangest tree she'd ever seen!

"Hey," she said to Juni. "Look at that crazy thing!"

Juni gazed up at the looming tree. He'd never seen anything like it, either. The bark was a brilliant shade of lavender, dotted with mossy, green spots. The leaves were silvery and spoon shaped. At the base of the branches were giant, egglike pods, dusted with yellow powder. And nestled inside bundles of the glinting leaves were giant, red flowers with brilliant yellow centers.

"Okay, some acorn has *definitely* fallen far from its oak," Juni said, staring at the strange plant. "What the heck is that thing?"

Then, to his surprise, Juni got an answer! Unfortunately, it came in the form of a threatening roar!

"Get off my property, trespassers!"

Carmen and Juni froze as the angry voice rang out of the nearby shrubs. Quickly, their spy instincts kicked in. They dropped into crouches, raised their fists, and planted fighting scowls on their faces.

But when the source of the voice burst into the open, they couldn't help staring—and dropping their guard!

This guy was as outlandish as his garden!

His gray hair was streaked with color, from a shocking pink to an olive-green. His short, tan overalls were splashed with countless daubs of paint. A long, leather rope hung from his wiry neck, and it was strung with at least two dozen clanking, homemade charms. Among them, Juni spotted a mutated car part and a tomato-shaped pincushion that had been converted into a doll, using paper clips and wine corks. Carmen also noticed a bit of petrified wood and a fish skeleton on the necklace.

But that wasn't all. The man's hands and wrists were covered with Magic Marker scrawls. One scribble looked like a poem. Another seemed to be a rough blueprint for a new building. There were sketches on every knuckle and landscapes on each arm.

And why were these scribbles so clear to the Spy Kids? Because the man's fists were dangerously close to their faces!

"You're trespassing on my property!" the artist—who had to be Ed N. Falls—screamed as he swung at them. "I'll give you ten seconds to get outta here!"

"What do we do?" Juni asked his sister as they ducked the old man's punches. "Stay and fight?"

"Well, the thing about fighting," Carmen breathed back, "is that it's not a very effective way to gather information."

"Plus, it hurts!" Juni said pragmatically.

"Okay! No fighting then." Carmen agreed. "Let's try Escape Maneuver #34-A! We'll regroup and question him later."

"The wormhole," Juni cried. "You got it!"

They made their decision just in time. Ed was punching at them double-time now! If they hadn't acted then, one of them was sure to have wound up battered, bewildered, and bruised.

Juni used his well-honed spy skills to scuttle between Ed's legs. While Ed looked down at Juni, Carmen ran around behind the angry artist and tapped him on the right shoulder. The artist peeked behind him, but Carmen ducked out of his line of vision before he saw her. Then she popped up and tapped him on the *left* shoulder.

The flummoxed guy twisted his head to look in that direction.

"Who's doing that!" he demanded.

That's when Juni ducked back between the man's paint-smudged feet.

"Wha—" Ed cried, twisting again to gape at Juni.

Just as Carmen and Juni had hoped, all that swinging and twisting made their foe go googly-eyed.

And knock-kneed.

Finally, he lost his balance completely and fell right on his butt!

That gave Carmen and Juni just enough time to dash for the front gate. As they darted through, Carmen tapped the tin picture they had seen earlier. The shrubs rumbled, and the trees shifted again. In an instant, the fantastic garden had disappeared from the Spy Kids' view.

"Whew!" Carmen huffed. She wiped a sheen of sweat from her forehead and sank down to a seated position on the dirt road. "So that was Ed Falls! Not the most welcoming guy, is he?"

"Definitely!" Juni said. He was dusting dirt off his clothes cheerily, with a huge grin.

"Hello!" Carmen growled. "We were almost pounded to a pulp back there. Why are you so happy?"

"Because," Juni announced, "old Ed clearly has something to hide. Why else would he have been so eager to get rid of us? We have our suspect!"

"You're right!" Carmen cried, jumping to her feet. "And I thought this really *was* a dead end."

"*Dead* being the operative word," Juni said with a frown. "Because that's what we're gonna be if that guy catches us on his property again."

Carmen gulped.

"Yeah," Juni sighed, "I guess it's time to make like a tree and leave."

Now Carmen scowled.

"You just want to give up?" she demanded. "What about our mission? And all these addled people? What about Mom and Dad? If they weren't having so much fun in their silly states, they'd be totally disappointed in you right now!"

Juni shook his head at his sister.

"I don't think you understood me," he said, a wry smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "I said we're going to make like a *tree* and *leave*!"

He reached into a pocket of his cargo pants and pulled out what looked like a candy bar. Its emerald-green wrapper was stamped with fancy brown letters.

"First you want to bail, and then you want to snack?" Carmen sputtered. "Juni, could you please get your mind off food for one second? We've got a situation here!"

Juni rolled his eyes and tore at the candy wrapper. Inside was a bar of bright green taffy swirled with crusty-looking chocolate. It looked pretty gross. But Juni took a big bite anyway.

"Eww!" Carmen muttered grumpily. "You'll eat anything, Juni."

Suddenly, Juni's face contorted with disgust. As he chewed his snack, his eyes watered, and he had to suppress an impulse to gag. Finally, with an icky, hacking noise, he swallowed.

"Ugh!" he grunted. "That tasted like leaf mulch, grass clippings, and potting soil. Disgusting! Try it!"

Juni tossed the half-gnawed candy to his sister. She was shaking her head as she caught it.

"No way!" she squealed. "Why on earth would I want to eat that. . . . Juni? What's happening to you?"

Juni looked down at his hands. They were quickly becoming as brown as branches. Meanwhile, his red curls were becoming wilder than ever. In fact, they were mutating into long, leafy vines!

"You're becoming a . . . a . . . plant!" Carmen screeched.

"Thanks to Uncle Machete's new, camouflaging candy, Make Like a Tree and Leave," Juni crowed. At this point, one of his ears had sprouted a branch.

Carmen quickly read the fine print on the candy wrapper.

"But its effects only last for an hour," she said. "We'd better get going!"

She took a big chomp out of the candy bar, grimaced at the grassy taste, then gasped as her own arms and legs became brown and barklike. Her long, dark hair morphed into yellow vines, and her graceful feet grew hard and blocky, like tree roots.

"All set," she announced, when her transformation was complete. The vines over her leaf-green face rustled as she whispered to her brother. "So, the plan is to infiltrate the garden, unseen. Then,

when we've got Falls in our sights, we cuff him with these vines!"

Carmen grabbed a handful of her now viney hair.

"*Then* we question him until he spills the beans!" Juni said, rubbing his brown hands together eagerly. "If Ed Falls is behind this rash of ridiculousness, he must be clever and devious."

"But he's no match for our spy skills," Carmen declared. "With this camouflage, we'll have him caught in no time! Falls won't know what hit him!"

Half an hour later, the Spy Kids were slumped on the ground inside a thicket of nettles. Their leaves were torn and tattered. Their bark was scuffed and scabby. Every egg in Juni's bird's nest was cracked.

"Ah," Juni sighed, as a few of the stinging plants grazed his brown calves, leaving red welts in their wake. "Stinging nettles are a *relief* after what we've just been through."

"No kidding!" Carmen sighed. "For an artist, Ed Falls has quite a sophisticated security system!"

She wasn't kidding. The Spy Kids had been besieged from the moment they'd stepped back into the garden. As they had crossed through the silverware gate, the cutlery had suddenly

started . . . cutting! The knives had sliced and diced at the Spy Kids' barky skin. The forks had prodded at them, poking holes in their leaves. And the spoons had slapped noisily at their feet.

Squealing, the Spy Kids had hurled themselves out of the silverware's range, only to land smack-dab upon Ed's rubber-band fence. Carmen had ricocheted off the bouncy barricade with a *sproing*!

"Aaaaaagh!" she'd cried, before landing in the branches of a gnarled poplar tree.

Meanwhile, Juni had become hopelessly entangled in a rubber-band web. He'd been stuck there until Carmen had been able to clamber down the cedar tree's trunk—not such an easy feat when one's limbs had gone leafy—and free him.

Seriously spooked, the spies had stepped cautiously onto the marble walkway—only to be immediately pelted by hundreds of little glass orbs!

"Run for cover!" Carmen had gasped. The Spy Kids had dashed through the brush and hurled themselves into the leaning tower of peanut-butter jars. They'd collapsed on the floor of the skinny, cylindrical structure, gasping with relief. They heard the marbles pinging on the peanut butter jars—but they were protected.

They were bathed in extraordinary beauty! Each of the jars that made up the tower wall was filled with water dyed a different color, from the palest blue to the brightest yellow. As the sun glinted through the jars, the tower lit up with brilliantly colored beams. The effect was more dazzling than that of any stained-glass window. The Spy Kids were stunned into silence.

Until . . . the peanut-butter jars began bursting, one by one!

"Eeeek!" Carmen had screamed as she was doused with a spray of tangerine-colored liquid.

"Aaaigh!" Juni had cried, as he was bathed in a shower of indigo.

Next, pink, turquoise, and eggplant-colored water rained down upon them. Blinking and sputtering, the Spy Kids tumbled back out of the tower.

It was then that they'd spotted the nettle nest, a tangle of weeds that appeared untouched by the crafty hand of Ed Falls. They'd dived into the nest.

Now they were catching their breath, scratching their stings, and wondering what the heck to try next.

"What did we do wrong?" Juni groaned. "We were totally camouflaged!"

"Lotta good it did," Carmen said, wringing pink water out of her vines. "Falls's system is all about motion detection."

"And, come to think of it, making like a tree should really mean standing in one place," Juni noted.

Carmen slapped her forehead, breaking a twig that had sprouted from her eyebrow.

"Duh!" she said. "Trees don't just walk straight into towers or go through gates. We weren't stealthy in the slightest!"

Juni peeked out of the nettle nest.

"On the other hand, now that Falls knows we're back, we're as good as caught," he pointed out. "He'll come looking for us soon."

"Right!" Carmen said, jumping to her feet. "But this time, we'll stand perfectly still and blend into the other trees. He won't see a thing until . . ."

". . . Until it's too late! We'll have snagged him!" Juni finished.

The Spy Kids hopped over their nettle fence and situated themselves on either side of the Popsicle-stick walkway. Then they waited.

And waited.

And waited some more.

"Falls will probably come this way sometime

soon, don't you think?" Juni whispered to his sister through clenched teeth.

"Shhhh!" Carmen admonished. "I think I hear something."

That something was a distant, buzzing sound.

"It's just chirping cicadas," Juni said, with a shake of his leafy head.

"Well, they are getting louder," Carmen whispered in bewilderment.

Trying to move her head as little as possible, she glanced up. She stared! A swarm of cicadas was flying through the air, and it was headed straight for the Spy Kids! The grasshopperlike bugs were so thick they formed a green cloud!

As the cloud got closer, Carmen gasped.

Smack-dab in the middle of the cicada swarm was Ed Falls! The little bugs grasped his clothes with their feet, holding him aloft as they flew. From that great height, Ed was surveying his property, searching for the intruders.

Exchanging a panicked glance with Juni, Carmen held herself as still as possible.

Which made no difference at all to the sly artist. When he and his swarm of cicadas reached a spot just above Carmen and Juni's heads, they buzzed to a halt. Then the hovering gardener began to speak.

"You know," he said to the air, "when you're an eccentric, reclusive artist, people tend to underestimate you. They think of you as disheveled, disorganized, absentminded."

Carmen and Juni held their breath. Where was Falls going with this?

"On the contrary, I know every nook and cranny of my garden," Ed said, again to no one in particular. "I planted every petunia myself. Sired every cedar. Bathed each and every tulip bulb with tender, loving care. If there's a leaf out of place, I'll know it."

As he spoke, the cicadas lowered him to the Popsicle-stick walkway, to a spot directly between the Spy Kids. He peered through their branches at their stunned, leaf-green faces.

"And guess what happens to those unwanted weeds?" Ed asked.

Carmen and Juni braced themselves.

"They are *expelled* from the garden of Ed N. Falls!" the angry artist roared.

Before the Spy Kids could react, the cicadas descended upon them! Carmen felt thousands of sticky little feet grip her branches and vines. Even Juni's wild, viney hair was grabbed by the chittering bugs.

Carmen and Juni began to shriek in fear as the bugs lifted them off the ground.

"Out! Out! Out of my garden!" Ed roared.

The cicadas swooped the Spy Kids over the trees and towers. The moment they crossed Ed's property line, the bugs dropped them.

"Ooof!" Juni grunted, as he landed on the dirt road. Luckily, his fluffy branches cushioned his fall. Carmen landed next to him a moment later. Wearily, the two started to get up.

No sooner had the leafy siblings stumbled to their feet than Carmen's skin went from brown and green to freckled and honey colored. At the same time, Juni's vines changed back into auburn curls.

The Spy Kids were back to normal—and farther away from their foe than ever!

CHAPTER 7

Carmen and Juni looked down at their normal arms and legs. Their leaves and vines and barklike skin had disappeared, but the nettle stings, bumps, and bruises of their failed mission remained.

"We were kicked out of the garden of Ed N.," Carmen complained. "How harsh!"

"Yeah," Juni said. "How are we gonna spy on this guy if we can't even get close to him?"

"If only we had someone at the OSS who could do some digging for us," Carmen said mopily. "But everyone's gone goofy! We're utterly alone!"

"Uh . . . maybe not," Juni whispered, pointing down the dirt road. Carmen looked. Her eyes widened. A 1950s car—about twenty-five feet long, painted gold, and outfitted with swooping tail fins—was heading straight for them. The car skidded into the dead end with a dramatic screech of its tires. Then the doors swung open, unleashing a wave of throbbing techno music. Two of the

hippest grown-ups Carmen and Juni had ever seen emerged from the cool-cat car.

The man—a big, burly guy with bleached, gelled hair—wore black pants, a black jacket, black sunglasses, and a black turtleneck. The woman wore her hair in white-blond spikes identical to the man's, and had on giant, red glasses. She also wore a shawl embroidered with rainbow-colored, primitive figures, pink-plaid shoes with upturned, pointy toes, and feathery earrings that dangled down to her shoulders. She looked like a walking art exhibit.

In a moment, Carmen and Juni found out why.

"Why, hello, there," the woman said, skimming over to the Spy Kids. "You must be fellow art lovers."

"Right . . . sure," Juni said. "And you are . . ."

"We are Marty and Roberta Winesap," the man announced in a gravelly voice. He reached into his breast pocket and whipped out a couple of lime-green business cards, which he handed to the kids.

Carmen glanced at the card.

"Um," she said, "I don't mean to be rude, but I think the printer messed up this business card. It's completely blank."

"Mine, too," Juni said, turning his card over.

"Excuse me!" Marty replied, rolling his eyes. "It's not *blank.* It's minimalist! Surely you've heard of the minimalist art movement? You know, blank white canvases, empty art installations? It's all about purity."

"*O*-kay," Carmen said cautiously.

But she was *thinking*: these two have *definitely* been infected by the pollen.

"Let me ask you two something," Roberta said, adjusting her cherry-colored glasses and interrupting Carmen's thoughts. "Have you noticed people acting really loopy around here? Everyone's become strange and rather irresponsible."

Oh, I guess they *aren't* goofy. They're just . . . artsy, Carmen mused.

"We've definitely encountered a lot of oddness," Juni said. "Do you have any idea what's going on?"

"Who do ya think we are—secret agents?" Marty asked, walking to the edge of the road and attempting to peer through the thick shrubbery shielding Ed's garden. "We're just patrons of the arts. And with all this wackiness, we were concerned about our star artist, Ed Falls. We came to check up on him."

"You know Ed Falls?" Carmen blurted out.

"Do we know him?" Marty scoffed over his

shoulder. He was still looking hungrily through the foliage. "Little girl, we *made* Ed. Roberta and I own the land he lives on! We rented it to him thirty years ago, and he's been molding it into the world's biggest masterpiece ever since."

"And don't forget the gallery, Marty, honey," Roberta said, examining her electric-blue fingernails.

"How could I?" Marty asked, turning back to the kids. His eyes were ablaze with artistic passion. "You have clearly gotten a glimpse of Ed's genius, correct?"

"Oh, yeah," Juni said, rubbing at one of his just-healing scabs.

"So, I'm sure you're now aware that Ed's not exactly wild about outsiders looking at his art," Marty continued. "But we think it's a crime to keep such genius hidden from the world! So, whenever we visit Ed, we, um, *liberate* a few paintings and sculptures from the garden. Then we display them in our gallery."

"You mean, you take them away from the setting Ed intended for them?" Carmen said. "Then you sell them?"

"You make it sound so crass, honey," Roberta said. "Believe me, if you were a grown-up art

collector, you'd understand. We're *for* the artist, not against him."

Carmen gave Juni a look. A look that her fellow spy read all too well. It said: *These folks are completely kooky. But they could also be our ticket into the garden. Time to stroke some arty egos!*

Juni dashed to Marty's side and reached up to clap the guy's meaty shoulder.

"I understand completely, Marty, baby!" he said in an exaggerated tone. "Nobody likes to mix art and commerce, but it's gotta be done, right?"

"It's like you read my mind, kid," Marty said, glancing over the top of his chunky, dark glasses at the Spy Boy.

"And that's why we want to talk to Falls," Juni continued. "I want to be a great creator like him some day. So, I thought I could ask him a few questions. Y'know, artist to artist. Who knows? With the right advice, I might make it big. And then . . . I'd need a gallery to sell my work."

"I hear ya, kid," Marty said conspiratorially. Again, he gazed yearningly in the direction of Ed's hidden garden. "Maybe there'll be a spot for you at Edlysian Fields—our gallery. And I'll only take eighty percent of your sales. It's a great deal, I promise."

"Deal!" Juni cried.

"So, will you introduce us to Ed Falls?" Carmen asked, stepping up to join her brother.

"Um . . . well . . ." Roberta said from behind her husband. "That might not be doable."

"You are his patrons, right?" Carmen said. "Doesn't that mean he totally trusts you?"

"It's not that simple," Marty said. "Artists can be temperamental. And Ed can really be temper-*tantrumental*! He's recently decided he doesn't want to see us anymore."

"He wants to create art for art's sake!" Roberta stated, looking bewildered. "And he wants to do it completely alone!"

Carmen's face fell.

And Juni stamped his foot in frustration.

That was when Marty began to look a little bit suspicious.

"You seem pretty upset about this," he said to Juni challengingly.

"It's my . . . artistic passion!" Juni stuttered. "I think Ed Falls is so . . . great! I just *know* he could tell me what it takes to be a true artist."

"Or, maybe . . ." Roberta said, stalking forward on her pink-plaid heels, "you want in on the action! People are always trying to steal Ed away from

us! Well, he's *our* meal ticket. You can't have him! You just can't!"

"No, that's not it!" Carmen squeaked.

"Oh, yeah?" Marty roared. "Prove it! Prove that you're artists and not art stealers!"

Carmen and Juni looked at each other with desperate glances. Juni grabbed a twig off the ground and began scribbling in the dirt. After a few moments of frantic creation, he jumped to his feet and cried, "Here's your proof!"

Marty and Roberta rushed over. Juni had made a rough copy of one of Ed's animals—a sea horse riding a pony. It defied reason. It was riddled with broad brushstrokes. It was just the sort of thing, he thought, that Marty and Roberta would coo over.

"It is . . ." Roberta gasped. "It's . . ."

Juni puffed out his chest (and belly) with pride and waited for the art dealers to heap praise upon him and his artwork.

"It's abysmal!" Roberta finished.

"I've seen better art on an Etch A Sketch," Marty scoffed. He slammed a fist into his palm and glowered at Juni. "You're no artist!"

"You're right!" Carmen's voice rang out from behind them. "*I'm* the artist."

Roberta, Marty, and Juni whipped around to

look at the Spy Girl. Or rather, the Spy Girl's head! Carmen had buried herself in a pile of dirt. Only her head and feet were visible. Her face was smudged with clay, and one of her boots had come unlaced.

"Uh, Carmen?" Juni whispered. "What are you doing?"

"I'm *Waiting for Chapeaux*," Carmen intoned loudly.

"She's waiting for a hat?" Marty said to Roberta.

"Shhhh," Roberta admonished her husband. "I think, Marty, honey, that this is *performance* art."

"Weird," Marty said.

"Exactly!" Roberta cried, her eyes shining with anticipation.

Meanwhile, Carmen went on.

"I'm waiting, and . . . I cannot take off my shoe!" she cried.

"Huh?" Marty and Juni said, both completely confused.

"And the willows," Carmen called out. "They weep no more. And . . . my foot, oh, it doth hurt. As I wait. Waitingwaitingwaiting . . . for *chapeaux*."

Carmen closed her eyes and let her head drop.

Roberta burst into enthusiastic applause as Marty and Juni just stared.

"Oh, my dear," Roberta cried, running up to dig Carmen out of her pile of dirt. "You are a true performance artist. So derivative. And pedestrian. Absolutely retrograde!"

"Uh . . . thanks!" Carmen said. "I think!"

"Does that mean that now you'll help us meet Ed Falls?" Juni said, jumping in.

"Unfortunately," Roberta said, "Ed hates pretentious artists like you even more than he hates art dealers like us. I guess you're outta luck, kids. But good luck with your careers. Especially you, kid. You'll need it!"

With that, the hipster art dealers hopped back into their boatlike gold car and darted away, leaving the Spy Kids more flummoxed than ever.

An hour later, the Spy Kids were parking their Leap Frog outside a bright-orange, cube-shaped building. In keeping with the rest of the strange day, this building was exceedingly odd! It had windows at the sidewalk level, but its door was fifteen feet above the ground! One had to climb a ladder to reach it.

Towering over the whole affair was a flashing purple sign that read EDLYSIAN FIELDS.

"Whew," Carmen said as she hopped down from the Leap Frog. "I'm glad the Winesaps' gallery is outside of the goofiness zone. The ride over was pretty hairy. All those jaywalkers and people staggering around under the weight of twenty-scoop ice-cream cones or dozens of silly hats. At least everyone around here seems to still be sane."

Juni stared at the topsy-turvy art gallery and shook his head.

"*Almost* everybody," he said. "Check out this

bizarro building. These Winesaps are just plain weird."

"Which is exactly why we need our secret weapon," Carmen said. "Is everything in place for the plan?"

Juni checked his spy watch. A signal light on its high-tech miniscreen had just turned from red to green.

"All systems go!" he said.

With looks of determination on their faces, the Spy Kids scaled the ladder to Edlysian Fields's front door. After clambering through the glossy, orange portal and descending an interior ladder, they looked around.

"Whoa!" Carmen breathed.

"And I thought the *outside* of the building was out-there," Juni said.

The inside was even more topsy-turvy. The floor was made of stamped-tin ceiling tiles intersected by several bubble-shaped windows.

"Skylights," Carmen whispered, rolling her eyes.

The ceiling was covered in various kinds of flooring, from black-and-white linoleum tiles to pale, wooden planks.

And on the walls? Besides exposed rafters and purple plastic panels, there was art. All of the work

was clearly that of Ed Falls. There were vast, swirly landscapes and otherworldly, mutant animals. There were gardens painted on rusty tin and tin men painted on planks of wood. The works were both fabulous and mystifying. And—despite the fact that their creator was potentially evil—neither Spy Kid could help admiring the artworks' beauty.

They were still gaping at the vast display when a growly voice startled them from . . . overhead? Carmen and Juni looked up. Hanging from the twenty-foot-high—er—floor was the strangest office they'd ever seen. It was a giant hammock made of soldered scrap metal. It swung gently in the breeze from the air-conditioning unit. Desks, computers, fax machines, and phones rolled to and fro with every movement.

Glaring over the edge of this dangling office was an unhappy-looking Marty Winesap.

"Hey, Roberta," Marty said over his shoulder. "Look who's come to pay a visit. It's those shrimps in cargo pants."

Roberta's face appeared over the side of the hammock, too.

"Looks like somebody's got a lot of interest in Ed's art," the woman said suspiciously. She'd

exchanged her chunky, cherry-red glasses for bright-green, star-shaped ones. But the whimsical eyewear didn't make her look any less menacing. "An *unhealthy* interest."

Without taking his beady eyes off the kids, Marty reached out and grabbed a polished fireman's pole that linked the swinging platform to the surface below. He whizzed down the brass pole. Roberta quickly followed.

Both of the ornery art dealers began to move menacingly toward the Spy Kids.

Marty clenched his fists.

And Roberta swung at the air with some kung fu punches.

The Spy Kids began to back slowly away.

"Heh-heh, you don't understand," Juni said nervously.

"Yeah, it's not what you think," Carmen peeped. "We're not here about Ed's art."

"Like I believe that," Marty declared sarcastically. "You've come to *Edlysian* Fields, yet you have no interest in Ed. If that's true, kiddies, who did you come here to talk about?"

"Me," a voice declared.

The Winesaps gasped.

The Spy Kids grinned.

All four of them craned their necks to look up at the gallery door. There, with long, black hair flowing down his back and an egotistical smirk upon his craggy face was . . .

"Machete Cortez," the man announced, by way of self-introduction. "Artist . . . extraordinaire!"

With a wink at his niece and nephew, Uncle Machete descended the ladder and stood before the art dealers, glaring at them imperiously.

"I've never heard of this 'great artist' Machete Cortez," Roberta said dismissively. "Now, if you'll excuse us, we have children to beat up—er, I mean, educate! These are, uh, art students."

"Well, then, you'll *all* benefit from what I am about to show you," Uncle Machete declared haughtily. He reached into his shirt pocket and closed his fist around something. Then he held out his hand, dramatically unfolded his fingers and declared, "Feast your eyes on this!"

Marty and Roberta leaned forward. They peered at Uncle Machete's seemingly empty hand. Then Marty growled, "Thanks for the laugh, Hatchet—"

"That's *Machete*!" Uncle Machete roared.

"Okay, okay, you're a real cutup, I get it," Marty said, rolling his eyes. "But we're in no mood for

jokes or tricks. We are serious dealers of serious art."

"Let me ask you this," Machete said. "Have you ever heard of the world's smallest camera?"

"The microscopic one that spies use?" Roberta said.

"Si," Uncle Machete said. "Well, that's child's play compared to this invention—the world's smallest painting. I've got six of them in my hand right now. They were painted by me, and they are worth millions, I assure you."

"Ha!" Marty barked. "I'll believe it when I see it."

Uncle Machete whipped a complicated device out of his other pocket and said, "Just find me a place to plug in my powerful electron microscope, and you will."

Marty glanced at Roberta.

Roberta nodded subtly. The greedy dealers couldn't resist Uncle Machete's high-concept art. Not to mention his imperious personality!

"Climb up to our office," Marty said, placing a pair of mountaineer's gloves in Machete's free hand and steering him toward the fireman's pole. "We'll take a look."

Carmen and Juni pumped their fists in triumph. The plan was working! The Winesaps had forgotten all about them. Now they could start spying—

"Oh," Marty said, just before the three grown-ups ascended to the office. "I almost forgot about our little guests."

Marty strode across the gallery, grabbed the ladder propped up beneath the door, and pressed a button in its side. The ladder instantly collapsed, folding up into a briefcase-sized block. Tucking it under his arm, Marty headed for his office.

"Just in case you feel like leaving before the end of our 'lesson,'" he said to the Spy Kids in a threatening tone.

Carmen and Juni stared back at him, looking trapped and terrified.

With a satisfied nod, Marty followed Uncle Machete and Roberta up to the office.

Only then did the Spy Kids grin, turn to each other, and start whispering.

"He thinks a missing ladder's gonna stop us?" Carmen giggled. "As if we didn't have half a dozen wall-climbing gadgets in our pockets, from sucker soles for our shoes to a claw-tipped climbing cable! I'd laugh out loud if it wouldn't blow our cover."

"And if time weren't of the essence," Juni whispered. "Let's start looking for evidence."

Without another word, the Spy Kids began skulking around the space. Carmen used a

microcamera to photograph Ed's art, looking for goofy themes or sinister messages. Juni dusted the works for the yellow happy dust.

Neither attempt turned up a thing.

Meanwhile, Uncle Machete's time with the Winesaps was running out.

"Okay, I'll give you this," Roberta was saying to Uncle Machete in the bobbling office above. "Your paintings are brilliant. But we're more in the market for some . . . sculpture. Have you got any of that in your pocket, Mr. Genius?"

"Um . . . sure!" Uncle Machete replied loudly. "It will take me, oh, two or three minutes to assemble it, though!"

"That's the signal," Carmen said to Juni. "We've got to finish up quick."

"But we've found nothing that hints at evil!" Juni said morosely. "Nothing! Unless you count the outrageous prices the Winesaps are charging for Falls's work. Fifty thousand dollars for a painted rock? Doesn't that seem a little extreme?

"Anyway," he continued, "I don't think there's any evidence here. All we've got is weird, tin animals. And that mermaid made of pebbles. And those pretty paintings framed in weird, purple wood. And—"

"Wait a minute," Carmen interrupted. "What weird purple wood are you talking about?"

"Over there," Juni said, pointing at a series of landscapes tacked to one of the plastic panels. The paintings were massive and mystical-looking. And their frames were almost as intriguing. Shards of wood were crudely nailed together at odd angles. The wood was bright lavender and spattered with mossy, green spots.

"I've seen that wood before," Carmen said, running up to examine the frames more closely. "In Falls's garden!"

"You're right," Juni gasped. "That crazy tree with the big, red flowers had this exact same bark."

"And remember?" Carmen pointed out. "The moment we spotted it, Falls attacked us!"

"So, what we've got here is a shady tree!" Juni said, putting his finger to his temple.

"A tree that might be at the root of our problem," Carmen declared.

"So, let's grab a sample of this wood and get out of here before Marty and Roberta come back," said Juni.

The Spy Kids used their high-tech laser cutter to slice a bit of the lavender wood from one of Ed's

frames. Juni popped a few suction cups onto the soles of his shoes, and Carmen tossed her claw-tipped climbing cable up to the gallery door. A moment later, they'd scaled the wall, given Uncle Machete, who was still in the dangling office, a furtive wave good-bye, and left Edlysian Fields behind!

After the Spy Kids had escaped Edlysian Fields, they scrambled into the Leap Frog and hopped away as fast as the bouncy vehicle could take them. Only when they were miles from the unwelcoming gallery did they breathe easy.

Well, sort of easy.

Because they still had spy work left to do.

"Okay," Juni said, pulling the scrap of lavender wood from his pocket as Carmen drove. "We've got evidence. But evidence of what? We need to analyze this baby to find out."

"Right," Carmen agreed. "But you know who usually does our analysis. . . ."

"Mom and Dad," Juni said ruefully. "Otherwise known as the OSS's star analysts."

It was true. In the years before Carmen and Juni had become Spy Kids, their parents had had secret identities. They'd told their children that they were

mild-mannered computer consultants. But in truth, they were retired spies. Once upon a time, Ingrid and Gregorio Cortez had been the most dangerous spies their countries had ever known. They were *so* dangerous that Ingrid's spy agency had ordered her to take Gregorio out! At the same time, Gregorio's employers had told him to get rid of Ingrid.

Instead, the two ruthless spies had fallen in love at first sight. They'd gotten married and become the parents of the Spy Kids.

That was when they'd begun to reconsider living the spy life. Traveling the world to eliminate supervillains, defuse bombs, and get into kung fu fights didn't exactly mix well with participating in school car pools and cooking three square meals a day. So, the Cortezes had decided to drop out of the spy biz—at least the death-defying part of it. There was still a lot of spy work that could be done from a desk. And that was just what Ingrid and Gregorio had begun to do.

When they'd told their kids they were doing computer consulting, the Cortezes had actually been analyzing sensitive intelligence gathered by spies all over the world. From mysterious archaeological artifacts to encrypted computer documents

to code language created by mad villains—the older Cortezes made sense of it all.

In fact, they'd been total stay-at-home spies until the OSS had called them in to do one last, irresistible save-the-world mission. The only problem? All that desk work had made them a little sleepy at the wheel. Ingrid and Gregorio's mission had barely begun when they were captured. That was when Carmen and Juni had become spies themselves. They'd swooped in and saved their parents' butts!

And from that point on, the Spy Kids and their Spy Parents had had a system: Carmen and Juni went out and gathered intel. After all, you should never send an adult to do a kid's job! They had sent that evidence home to their parents, who'd used it to get to the bottom of the mystery.

"Do you think there's any chance Mom and Dad can dissect our little wood chip now?" Juni wondered aloud.

"Well, there's only one way to find out," Carmen said. "It's time to phone home."

Carmen reached for the videophone on the dashboard of the Leap Frog and dialed their parents' private line. A moment later, an image appeared on the screen. It was Dad! He was standing in their kitchen, grinning goofily.

"Hello, *mis niños*," he cried. "Whatcha doing?"

"Oh . . ." Juni said, glancing at his sister carefully. "We're just spying. What are you doing, Dad?"

"Making lunch," Dad said. "Should I set a place for you two at the table?"

"Hey," Juni whispered to Carmen excitedly. "He's making lunch. And setting the table. Those are pretty responsible, Dad-like things to do. Maybe our parents have been de-goofed!"

"I'm not so sure," Carmen murmured, glancing at her Dad's grin on the computer screen. "I'm gonna investigate further."

Carmen raised her voice to address her father.

"So, Dad," she asked. "What're you making for lunch?"

"Oh, just something light," Dad said, backing away from the videophone's camera to give his children a full view of the kitchen. "Fudge!"

The kids gasped as the kitchen came into focus. Their father was indeed making fudge—marshmallow peanut-butter fudge, to be exact. And he was whipping it up on a brand-new, marble-topped candy counter, stuck smack-dab in the middle of the kitchen!

Behind Dad, an old-fashioned popcorn cart was

rattling away, spewing fluffy kernels all over the floor. And off to the left, Mom was whipping up cotton candy in a supersized sugar spinner.

"I don't know whether to laugh or cry!" Juni exclaimed.

"Well, there's one thing I do know," Carmen muttered to her brother. "Mom and Dad are still loopy."

"Definitely. Maybe there's someone at the OSS who can decipher this evidence," Juni said, glancing at his wood chip.

"It's worth a try," Carmen said.

Nodding wistfully, Juni turned back to the computer screen.

"Mom, Dad," he said. "We're off to the OSS. Enjoy your, er, lunch. And hey, save some for me!"

Laughing, the Cortez parents waved good-bye. Juni hung up the Leap Frog's videophone and glanced at his sister.

"Let's head to Headquarters," he said. Then he heaved an irritable sigh. "I can't believe I have to go through the All Points Security Clearance Station procedure again! Two tickle tests in one day! This mission just gets wackier and wackier!"

Many minutes—and ticklish giggles—later, the Spy

Kids had made it through the rigorous All Points Security Clearance Station. As they headed for the front door of the massive headquarters building, Carmen whistled a little tune.

"What are you so cheerful about?" Juni said suspiciously. "I don't have to spray you with more KnockDownDragOut, do I?"

"No," Carmen said. "I just happened to notice the difference in our body mass indexes."

"What about 'em?" Juni grumbled.

"Oh, it's just that the robot said I'm fit as a fiddle," Carmen said. "And you . . ." her voice trailed.

"Y'know," Juni growled threateningly, "I still have those joystick beat-up photos. I stored the digital images on my spy watch. Be careful, or maybe I'll just find Gary Giggles once we're inside Headquarters and give him a little look-see."

"No!" Carmen screamed in anguish.

"I believe the proper terminology is, 'No, please, I will pay you in chocolate,'" Juni prompted.

"Fine!" Carmen agreed, adding quietly, "But last time I checked, chocolate was easy to come by."

"Whatever," Juni said snidely as he reached Headquarters's front door. Now *he* was the one wearing the grin, as his sibling scowled. "We're here. Now let's assess the damage."

Squaring their shoulders, the Spy Kids stormed in to their home away from home—the vast, sleek, OSS Headquarters. The place was usually occupied by serious spies and analysts.

Except for today, when none of them seemed very serious at all.

It looked as though the goofy dust had permeated the entire OSS!

The Spy Kids' first clue came from the officer guarding the metal detector just inside the front door. Instead of sitting, in uniform, at her usual post behind a lectern, she was wearing a pair of big, polka-dotted bloomers and splashing around in an inflatable pool!

Next, the Spy Kids walked into the looming lobby. There, they saw Devlin's formerly severe secretary, Miss Manju. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor surrounded by spies in billowing pants and long braids.

"Ommmm," they all chanted. "Feel the love, feel the looooooove!"

"Spies doing touchy-feely yoga?" Carmen cried. "Now I've seen everything."

"Oh, I doubt that," Juni said drily. He pointed down the wide hallway that connected the lobby to the rest of Headquarters. At the bend in the corridor,

a grown man in an olive-green uniform had just kicked off his shoes. He began racing down the polished, marble floor. When he reached maximum speed, he started sliding across the slick surface. He made it a full ten feet before collapsing onto his knees, chortling with glee.

"Is that who I think it is?" Carmen gasped.

"Yup," Juni said. "Five-star general Dwayne Wisenhammer, sock-skating in the hallowed halls of the OSS."

Carmen shook her head.

"This is a dark day for our agency," she intoned. "Let's head to the laboratory wing. We need to put a stop to this!"

Carmen and Juni stepped gingerly around the giggling general and made their way through Headquarters, skirting silly spies every step of the way. Finally, they reached the twelve-inch-thick titanium door that guarded the OSS science lab. After the kids typed a secret pass code into its electronic lock, the door hissed open.

"Maybe the goofy dust hasn't gotten this far," Juni said as he followed Carmen into the lab. No sooner had the words passed his lips than a scientist in a white lab coat spun past them.

"Look at me, look at me," the scientist cried as

he whirled in dozens of dizzy circles. "I'm a centrifuge! Whoo-hoo!"

"Or maybe it has," Carmen said with a sigh. "I think we're on our own!"

CHAPTER 10

Gulping back their apprehension, the Spy Kids headed toward the OSS lab's central hub. The circular room was lined with electronically secured doors. Next to each door was a computer screen detailing the goings-on in the particular lab.

Space-Age Analysis Unit, one screen read, *for examination of life forms recently discovered on the OSS's secret mission to Venus.*

"Oooh," Carmen said, shaking her head as she read the screen. "I hope none of these goofy scientists tells the public about that mission. Imagine how freaked people would be if they knew women really *were* from Venus."

"Like I couldn't have figured that out myself," Juni scoffed. "After all, girls are too weird to be of this world!"

"I'd make you take that back," Carmen growled, "but we haven't got time. We've got to figure out which lab will help us analyze our wood chip. Now, let's see. . . ."

Carmen moved on to the next door.

"'Animal training for secret spy missions,' won't do," she said. "And the underwater breathing tank would be a bust, too."

"What about, 'DNA, Atoms, and Quarks, Oh My'?" Juni said, pointing at another screen. "That should get to the heart of things."

"Maybe . . ." Carmen said doubtfully. "But it's not exactly right. We need something more earthy and organic."

"Like the 'OSS Conservatory'?" Juni piped up, pointing at yet another lab door.

"Exactly like the OSS Conservatory," Carmen exclaimed with a grin. "Let's go!"

Carmen joined her brother in front of the shiny, titanium door. *Also* standing there were two scientists playing patty-cake. Rolling their eyes, the Spy Kids gently pushed the former brainiacs aside and entered the conservatory.

"Whoa!" Juni cried. "I knew the OSS was outfitted, but I had no idea Headquarters housed its own rain forest!"

He was staring at a lush, tropical jungle, stocked with countless different plants, all nestled beneath a giant, glass bubble.

"And there's also a desert," Carmen exclaimed,

pointing at another glass enclosure. "And some tundra, prairie, and on and on."

"But what we want is the lab," Juni said, pointing to another glass enclosure. Instead of trees and flowers, that one was packed with computers, microscopes, and other plant-analyzing tools.

The kids hurried into this bubble and got to work. Juni took a sliver of the lavender wood chip and immersed it in a distilling solution. Carmen accessed a computer database and began searching for species of trees having green-spotted, lavender bark.

The kids examined the wood's cells under a powerful microscope. Then they x-rayed the chip in a giant CAT scan chamber. They aerated it. They aspirated it. They examined it from every angle.

And finally, in the far reaches of an obscure Web site that only a master hacker like herself could have tracked down, Carmen found a photo of a tree.

It had a lavender trunk spotted with mossy, green circles.

Its leaves were shaped like spoons.

It had red blossoms with bright yellow centers.

And at its branches' tips were dusty, yellow, bulbous pods.

"This is it!" Carmen cried, skimming over the Web page frantically. "It's a . . . a . . . LubLub tree!"

"LubLub tree?" Juni asked. "Never heard of it."

"That's because growing them has been outlawed for decades," Carmen announced with a tremor in her voice. As she read the LubLub tree data more closely, her brown eyes grew wider and wider, and her face got paler and paler. Juni gulped.

"Do I want to know why growing this tree is against the law?" he asked.

"No. You don't," Carmen said, still staring at the computer screen. "But I'm gonna tell you. It looks like our purple-barked tree is a sleeping monster. For a while, it simply looks garish and unusual. But when it finally reaches maturity, it grows pollen-producing pods. Then the tree begins spewing this pollen out into the air. Every day the pollen travels further and further from the pods. What's more, the more pollen the tree releases, the more it produces. It's a vicious cycle."

"And what does this pollen do?" Juni quavered.

"It causes a disease called Spring Fever!" Carmen cried. "This fever, as we now know, makes

people act loopy and shirk all responsibility. And it won't go away until spring ends and the LubLub tree goes dormant again. We're talking three months of silly and crazy behavior. Nobody will follow any rules, and nobody will get any work done!"

"This is not good," Juni cried. "Spring has just sprung, and the fever's already awful. By the end of the season, it could take over the world! Factories will fall apart. Corporations will collapse. Restaurants will be ruined. And schools will go silent. Hey! *That* part actually wouldn't be so bad!"

"Hardy-har," Carmen said sarcastically.

"What I want to know," Juni wondered, "is why the LubLub pollen didn't affect me. After all, there's a ton of it on my clothes."

He patted his leg, producing a puff of yellow powder as evidence.

"I guess your allergy medication saved you," Carmen said, "just like the KnockDownDragOut cured me. But there's no way enough people are on allergy medicine to keep the world running smoothly."

"Clearly," Juni sighed, pointing over Carmen's shoulder at the rain forest. Carmen followed her brother's gaze. Then she, too, sighed. A man and

women were swinging from tree to tree on long vines, yelping at each other like chimpanzees.

"How are we going to be able to respect these people again when this Spring Fever goes away?" she said.

"Speaking of," Juni said, "how *are* we going to make it go away? What does the database say about counteracting the LubLub pollen?"

Carmen consulted the computer once again. As she read through the data, she frowned. She began typing briskly and entered another database.

Then she began typing a bit more quickly.

And *then*, she began hacking at a frantic pace, speeding from databases to Web sites to online reference books.

Finally, she threw her hands up into the air and stamped her foot.

"I've got nothing! Nada!" she announced. "There's absolutely no formula for beating the LubLub pollen!"

"There's no formula in that computer, you mean," Juni said darkly. "But I think someone knows how to beat Spring Fever."

"What do you mean?" Carmen said.

"Search your photographic memory, Spy Girl," Juni said. "Remember what Falls said, just before

he got his buggy army to hoist us out of his garden?"

Suddenly, Carmen's mouth dropped open.

"You're absolutely right," she exclaimed. "Falls said, 'I know every nook and cranny of my garden. I planted every petunia myself. Sired every cedar. Bathed each and every tulip bulb with tender, loving care. If there's even a single leaf out of place, I'll know it.'"

Carmen stared at her brother. "So you're saying that Falls . . ."

". . . Has got to know all about the LubLub tree," Juni said. "He grew it. And now *he's* going to be the one to tell us how to beat it, whether he wants to or not! Come on, let's go!"

Juni and Carmen quickly made their way back to the Garden of Ed N. But this time, they came completely prepared for all of the evil artist's booby traps.

Well, *almost* completely prepared.

As the Spy Kids approached the front gate made of silverware, Juni felt woozy with dread. He couldn't help whimpering, "Are you *sure* your idea is the best one? There's no other way to beat this silverware?"

"Positive, Juni," Carmen sighed.

"What if . . . we rigged up a blowtorch? We could make one out of a laser cutter and your Sooper-Sonic hair dryer," Juni suggested. "Then we could melt that baby down in a jif."

"Yeah, *after* we wasted half an hour on construction," Carmen scoffed. "I'm sorry, Juni, but this is the way it's gotta be."

"Oh, all right," Juni huffed. "But remember, when this is all over, you promised me chocolate!"

"All right, all right," Carmen said. "Now, stay on your toes. We're almost at the gate."

The Spy Kids put up their dukes. Sure enough, the moment they reached the silverware portal, the knives, forks, and spoons began whacking away at them!

"Now!" Carmen ordered her brother.

Juni bit his lip. He hesitated. But then he thought of the OSS credo: Honor before personal gain or comfort. Or even snacks!

So he reached into the biggest, deepest pocket of his cargo pants and pulled out two handfuls of munchies. He began hurling sandwiches, pudding cups, even a small salami, at the vicious gate.

Just as Carmen had hoped, the ploy worked. The silverware turned its "attention" from the invading Spy Kids to the flying food. The forks

poked at the salami, the knives cut the crusts off the sandwiches, and the spoons scooped up pudding. The cutlery couldn't help it—slicing and dicing was what it was made for!

Meanwhile, Carmen and Juni were able to duck through the distracted gate unscathed.

Using two of Ed's tin paintings to shield themselves, the kids dashed to the rubber-band fence. They angled their bodies just so, then hurled themselves against the barrier. It bounced them up to the top of the leaning tower of peanut butter. Once there, the kids pulled a couple of rain ponchos over their heads and ducked inside the tower's rooftop turret. Just as before, several of the peanut-butter jars began bursting and dousing them with brilliant colors. But the ponchos protected the kids from getting soaked, which meant they could settle in and wait for Ed.

They didn't have to linger long. They heard the buzzing of Ed's cloud of cicadas almost immediately. Soon, the artist appeared over the kids' heads. He looked even more paint-daubed and crazy than before. And from their perch just beneath his feet, Carmen and Juni could see that the ideas Magic-Markered on Ed's arms had migrated to his ankles. He was wearing his inspiration on every limb!

He was also wearing a nasty glare. Held aloft by thousands of sticky insect legs, he glowered down at the spies.

"Once you've been expelled from the Garden of Ed N.," he roared, "you can never come back. That's the way these things work! Everybody knows that!"

"Guess we missed that lesson," Carmen retorted. "But I *did* pay lots of attention in my biology class."

"So what?" Ed yelled.

"So . . . have you ever heard the mating call of the common cicada?" Carmen asked. "It's really quite beautiful."

Carmen pushed a button on her spy watch. The button activated the watch's vast collection of sound files—specifically, the *chirp-chirp-chirp* of amorous cicadas.

Immediately, Ed's pack-bugs began chirping in return.

Then Carmen unstrapped her spy watch—and threw it into the nettle nest far below the tower.

"CHIRP-CHIRP-CHIRP," the cicadas cried louder. Then they dropped their fuzzy-haired master and darted after the watch.

"Aaaaaaghh!" Ed screamed. Luckily for him, he only plummeted a few feet before landing with a

grunt on the top of his own leaning tower of peanut-butter jars.

Before he could even catch his breath, Carmen and Juni seized him, cuffed him, and whisked him down the tower's circular staircase. Pausing only to retrieve Carmen's spy watch from the cicada-strewn nest of nettles, the kids hauled their captive over to the LubLub tree. They tied him to the tree's lavender trunk, then stared down at him with their arms crossed over their chests.

"All right, Mr. Falls," Juni said. "It's time for you to spill it."

"Oh, why?" Ed spat back, squirming within his bindings. "Do you want to make off with my artwork? Just like those greedy Winesaps?"

"Huh?" Juni said.

"What gave you that idea?" Carmen demanded.

"Why else would you invade my space?" Falls demanded in turn. "You don't expect me to believe that you were just here to admire my art, do you? To respectfully appreciate it? No. Young whippersnappers like you—and art dealers like Marty and Roberta—have lost sight of art's purpose. It's about living in the moment, about revering beauty; it's about sharing an experience with the world.

"I'll tell what my art *isn't*," Ed ranted on, his voice

getting louder and louder. "It's not something you can separate from this garden. The Winesaps have been stealing from me and sticking my work in their goofy gallery. Their greed has made me realize that my art is as rooted in this land as these trees. And that's where it should stay! I'm not gonna let them *or* you get your greedy hands on it!"

"Aha!" Juni cried, pointing an accusing finger at Ed. "You mentioned trees! Like the LubLub tree!"

"But, Juni," Carmen whispered. She turned to her brother, biting her lip. "He also said a lot of other things that . . . really make sense. Art *should* be about experience instead of crass commerce. At least, Ed's art should be. Maybe that really is the reason he shut us out of his garden."

"I've gotta admit," Juni replied, turning his back on their captive. "He does have a point. But I don't care how honorable his motives were. Unleashing Spring Fever on the world is inexcusable!"

"You're right," Carmen sighed. "Let's get back to our interrogation."

The Spy Kids turned back to Falls, ready to grill him all about the LubLub pollen.

But before they could begin, the artist cut them off again. This time, though, he didn't hurl an angry diatribe at them, or give them surly looks.

No, there was no anger this time. Instead, the old man began chortling with glee. And waggling his unruly eyebrows. And singing a nonsensical song.

He'd been struck silly with Spring Fever!

Carmen and Juni stared in shock at the goofy gardener. After a long moment, Juni recovered enough to remember the can of Anti-Snot Serum in his pocket. Pulling it out, he gave the artist a quick gulp of it. Almost immediately, Ed quit giggling. He shook his head as if he were coming out of a fog. Then he glared at the Spy Kids.

"What just happened?" he demanded. "What did you do to me? I have the sneaking suspicion that I was just singing. And laughing! And . . . and . . . ah-CHOOO!"

"First of all, bless you," Carmen said. "And second of all, it looks like you caught your own case of Spring Fever, Mr. Falls. Ironic, isn't it? Coming down with the very sickness you wanted to give to everyone *else* in the world?"

"I don't—*sniffle*—have any idea—*snorfle*—what you're talking about!" Ed snarled, before

unleashing another round of sneezes. Then he shook his head and muttered, "It sure is hard to keep my dignity when I'm tied to a silly, purple tree, sniffing and sneezing. These danged allergies . . ."

"You have allergies?" Juni said.

"Tons of 'em," Ed complained. "Dust, dander, pollen—it all gets to me. And wouldn't you know I'd run out of my allergy medication on the first day of spring? This just isn't my day."

"But," Carmen sputtered, "why on earth would you let your allergy medicine run out on the day you unleashed the LubLub pollen? It doesn't make much sense."

"The what-what pollen?" Ed sputtered. "Maybe you've taken my senses hostage, too, because I've *still* got no idea what you're talking about!"

More befuddled than ever, Carmen and Juni told the artist about the ever-expanding goofiness zone. And the Spring Fever. And the LubLub pollen behind it.

"Where does this LubLub pollen come from?" Ed asked innocently.

"Who are you kidding?" Juni demanded. "From the very LubLub tree you're tied to, Mr. Falls. Now, tell us how to cure Spring Fever, or you'll be sorry!"

"I wish I could," Ed replied. "But I didn't even know this *was* a LubLub tree until you told me it was."

"Sure," Carmen said skeptically. She began to pace in the dirt in front of Ed. "What about all that stuff you told us? 'I know every nook and cranny of my garden!' And 'If there's a leaf out of place, I'll know it.'"

"You were trespassing," he said with a shrug. "I was trying to be intimidating!"

Juni grunted in frustration and shook his fist at the LubLub tree's silvery leaves.

"Just great," he yelled. "Another dead end. I'm really starting to hate that purple tree."

"You and me both, kid," Ed said. "I actually never did like that tree."

"What do you mean?" Juni said. "This is *your* garden. If you didn't like the LubLub tree, why didn't you just get rid of it?"

"Because it's rude to refuse gifts," said Ed bluntly. "My landlords gave me this tree thirty years ago, when I first began turning their land into my masterpiece. I figured the least I could do was plant their goofy sapling as a sign of my appreciation."

"Your landlords?" Carmen gasped. "You mean, the *Winesaps*?"

Juni slapped his forehead as the situation became clear.

"All this time, we thought you were the pernicious pollinator," he cried. "But it was Roberta and Marty the whole time. You're just a pawn in their evil plot."

"A plot planted, along with the LubLub tree, thirty years ago," Carmen said. She was already kneeling next to the innocent artist, unwrapping his bindings and helping him to his feet.

"We're so sorry for the misunderstanding," she said. "But you have our word—we're going after those corrupt Winesaps. And not only will we make them stop Spring Fever, but we're going to get your artwork back from Edlysian Fields, too. Your work is meant to be experienced in its natural environment—not stuck for sale in some crazy gallery where nobody knows which end is up!"

"At last!" Ed cried. "Somebody understands me! You go get 'em, Spy Kids. And tell 'em Ed sent ya!"

As he cheered the Spy Kids on, Ed jumped up and down, waving his Magic-Markered hands in the air. Unfortunately, on the last jump, his knuckles knocked into one of the LubLub tree's fuzzy pollen pods. The coconut-shaped bulb popped off its

branch, landing on the cheering artist's head with a *kerthunk.*

A huge cloud of LubLub pollen poofed off the pod, settling onto Ed's face like buttercup-colored snow.

"Uh-oh!" Carmen said.

She was right to be alarmed. No amount of Anti-Snot Serum could fend off *that* much happy dust! With one sniff, Ed began heaving and ho-ing and laughing himself silly! He collapsed in a giggly heap at the Spy Kids' feet.

"What do we do now?" Juni cried.

"Well, we don't have time to do anything. We've gotta save the world," Carmen said. "Afterward, we'll personally come back and cool off Ed's Spring Fever. But right now, we've got to find the Winesaps!"

"Right," Juni said. Carmen was already racing out of the garden to start up the Leap Frog. Just before Juni followed her, he reached down to shake Ed's hand.

"You're a great artist, Mr. Falls," he said somberly. "We'll help you as soon as we can. In the meantime, have a good time with all your wacky art!"

Then Juni jumped into the Leap Frog. The Spy Kids were off on a new leg of their mission! Carmen

made the sproingy, green vehicle hop the entire way to Edlysian Fields. They had no choice—the town's drivers had abandoned any pretense of obeying the traffic laws. It was chaos. They were popping wheelies on the sidewalks and bashing mailboxes from their car windows. They tied tin cans to their bumpers and dragged them noisily down the street.

In fact, the people seemed to be growing more addled with Spring Fever each passing minute. Which meant the Spy Kids didn't have a minute to lose.

Of course, that was when a major time delay stopped them in their tracks! The moment they climbed up to the front door of Edlysian Fields, it became clear that something was horribly wrong.

Marty and Roberta Winesap were nowhere to be seen, and the rough gallery walls had been stripped clean of Ed's art. The only thing left in the topsy-turvy gallery was Uncle Machete—tied to a chair and laughing like a loon!

"Oh, no!" the Spy Kids cried together. They tumbled down the ladder and ran over to their uncle. His craggy face was dusted with LubLub pollen, and he was playing This Little Piggy with his own bare toes!

"Oh, wow!" Carmen cried. "The Winesaps must have given Uncle Machete a huge dose of pollen. Quick—the Anti-Snot Serum!"

Juni pulled out the bottle and poured his uncle a large amount. Soon, Uncle Machete was himself again—grouchy, gruff, and begrudgingly grateful to his niece and nephew.

"I can't believe those art-dealing dorks were able to overpower me," he growled, once he'd shook the haze of Spring Fever from his head. "How humiliating!"

"Don't be upset, Uncle Machete," Juni said as he untied his uncle. "Nobody—not even you—can resist that much LubLub pollen. So, what happened? Marty and Roberta didn't like your sculpture?"

"Of course, they did," Uncle Machete said, with a wounded look on his face. "They'd never seen a mallard duck constructed completely from computer chips and laser beams before! The problem came when they discovered you'd left—with a wood chip from one of Ed's frames!"

"They must have figured out we're spies!" Carmen realized.

"You got it," Uncle Machete said sorrowfully. "That's why they zapped me with that LubLub stuff.

They knew I'd tip you off if I were in my right mind."

"And now you are, and you have," Juni assured his uncle. "Which means we have to find them before they get too far! Did you see which way they went?"

"I think they headed that way," Uncle Machete said, pointing through one of the low windows.

"West," Carmen intoned.

"In other words," Juni said somberly, "straight into the heart of the goofiness zone."

"And I bet they've filled up on nose spray, allergy pills, and other sorts of LubLub-fighting stuff," Carmen said. "They'll be able to go anywhere without being struck by Spring Fever."

"Which leads us to the big question," Juni said. "Where *exactly* did they go?"

"With an entire gallery's worth of art," Carmen added. She sat on one of the bubble-shaped skylights and propped her chin on her fist, thinking hard.

"All our intel on the Winesaps shows us that they care more about money than art," she mused. "Why else would they take Falls's work out of its natural environment, then slap such outrageous price tags on it?"

"So, they must be itching to make a big sale," Juni surmised, "then pocket the cash and leave the country before we can arrest them for unleashing Spring Fever upon the world."

"There's only one hole in your theory," Uncle Machete said. "Who'd be crazy enough to pay those prices?"

Suddenly, Carmen and Juni gaped at each other. Together, they answered their uncle: "People stricken with Spring Fever, that's who!"

"They were just lying in wait," Juni said, pacing between the skylights angrily. "The moment the LubLub pollen made its way out of Falls's forest, everyone nearby would start doing irresponsible things."

"Like blowing their entire life savings on one single piece of art," Carmen said, jumping to her feet.

"But with us on their tail," Juni added, "the Winesaps couldn't wait for the folks to come to them. Instead, they had to take the art directly into Feverville."

"And I know the perfect spot for them to set up shop," Carmen said. She was already rushing toward the gallery door. "A place with plenty of LubLub pollen at the ready."

"Not to mention an art-filled garden," Juni said, racing after his sister, "where they can charge admission!"

"That's it!" Carmen said. "We're going back to the Garden of Ed N."

CHAPTER 12

Leaving Uncle Machete to finish recovering from his Spring Fever, the Spy Kids jumped into the Leap Frog and began hopping toward Ed's garden. They drove in silence, their faces masks of grim determination, until . . . they saw a man and a woman skipping down the street. The woman had arranged her curly hair in two pigtails. She was feasting on a huge, swirly cone of cotton candy.

The man was turning somersaults on the sidewalk. In between tumbles, he tossed peanuts and popcorn into the air, jumping to catch the snacks in his mouth.

While Juni watched the goofy couple wistfully, Carmen nudged him with her elbow.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" she said.

"If it's about Mom and Dad, yes," he replied softly.

"Y'know what, Juni?" Carmen said, suddenly pulling the Leap Frog to a halt. "Our parents have

completely lost their dignity to the LubLub pollen. I think they'd love the opportunity for a little bit of payback."

"Plus, *we* could use some backup," Juni piped up. "This is a really big mission. And Marty Winesap, for one, is a really big guy!"

"It's settled, then," Carmen declared, turning the Leap Frog around and steering it toward the Cortez house. "We're making a detour."

Hopefully, the Spy Kids hopped their way home.

When they arrived, they burst into their cozy kitchen.

"Mom? Dad?" Juni called. "Are you here?"

"Hee-hee-hee." Their mom's laughter echoed from the basement stairwell.

The Cortez basement was a spies' paradise. It housed the family's tricked-out training room, their wood-carving and metallurgy shop, an indoor pool, and more. It was also a place where a person with Spring Fever could get into a lot of trouble!

Gulping, the kids tracked their mom's chuckles down the basement stairs and through the sprawling, underground complex. Finally, they found her, with Dad, in the hair, makeup, and wardrobe workshop. It was there that the Cortezes created

their elaborate disguises for undercover missions.

But at the moment, Mom wasn't giggling about a mission. No, she was laughing at her husband—whose hair looked as if it belonged to a French poodle!

Mom looked, if possible, even worse! Her upper lip was sporting a mustache—penned on in permanent ink!

"Man, are their faces going to be red in a minute," Juni said as he pulled out his bottle of Anti-Snot Serum. He put the cap on the ground and attempted to pour out a dose. Nothing happened.

"Huh?" Juni gasped. Nothing was coming out of the bottle. The Spy Boy shook the bottle and tried again. It was no use. The Anti-Snot Serum was all gone!

"Now what?" Juni yelled.

Carmen marched over to their freaky-headed father, grabbed him by the elbow, and began leading him out of the costume shop.

"We'll ponder a solution on the way to Falls's garden," she called over her shoulder. "Now, you grab Mom, and let's get outta here!"

A few minutes later, Carmen parked the Leap Frog

in front of Ed's garden. The Spy Kids surveyed the sitch. Sure enough, their hunch had been right on! The once-empty dirt road and wildflower field were now teeming with fever-addled art fiends!

Moving among the cars parked willy-nilly on the road Juni saw a man with his pockets turned inside out. He was happily carrying away a tin mermaid. Just beyond that undoubtedly broke fellow, a woman in a tired-looking jacket was arm-wrestling a man in a janitor's uniform. They were vying for an assemblage of . . . peanut-butter jars filled with colored water!

"Hey," Juni cried. "Those must have been taken from Falls's leaning tower of peanut butter!"

"Art out of context," Carmen fumed. "That is just so wrong! What's more, look at the price tag on those jars."

"Seventy-five thousand dollars!" Juni sputtered, reading the tag. "Those folks don't look that rich. If they spend any more money on a few jars of water, they'll be ruined!"

"We won't let them," Carmen growled. "Because we're gonna get to the Winesaps first! Do you see them?"

Juni scanned the crowded dirt road. Then he pointed at a folding table, hastily set up near a mov-

ing truck brimming with Ed's art. Eager buyers were lined up in front of the table, ready to stuff great wads of cash into Marty Winesap's greedy hands.

Meanwhile, Roberta was standing in front of Ed's gate charging another lengthy queue of people hefty admission prices before sending them tromping through Ed's masterpiece, the garden.

"I'm almost glad Falls has Spring Fever," Carmen sighed, as she looked down on the chaotic commerce. "If he knew what was happening to his masterpiece, he'd go mad!"

"The least we can do is try to nip this in the bud," Juni said, unbuckling his seat belt. "Let's go."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Carmen said. "What about Mom and Dad?"

Juni sighed and peered behind him. Mom and Dad were sprawled on the Leap Frog's backseat, thumb-wrestling and chortling away. Needless to say, the bouncy ride over had *not* had a sobering effect on them.

"Let's just get them out of the Leap Frog, so they don't drive off," Juni said. "And make sure you take away their cash and credit cards. We wouldn't want them spending our college tuition money on a paper clip or something!"

The Spy Kids herded their parents out of the Leap Frog. They led them to a pretty patch of wildflowers, where the elder Cortezes immediately began turning cartwheels. Then Carmen and Juni squared their shoulders and began walking toward the evil art dealers.

As they tromped across the dirt road, Carmen felt a righteous rage bubbling up within her. She couldn't wait to arrest Marty and Roberta Winesap.

But Juni couldn't seem to muster up the same anger. In fact, he was starting to feel a little funny—literally. He began laughing. And skipping. He felt as light as air!

And he also felt a distinctive tickling in his nose. One that exploded suddenly in a giant sneeze!

"Huh!" he noted with a loud sniffle. "That's the first time I've sneezed since my allergy attack this morning. Hee-hee. Heeheeheehee!"

"Juniiii," Carmen said, stopping in her tracks to stare at her brother. "You're not feeling . . . feverish, are you?"

"No!" Juni laughed. "In fact, I feel as giddy as a gibbon!"

He began wailing and hooting like a monkey. His sister's face paled in horror.

"Your allergy medicine!" Carmen yelled at her

brother. "It must have worn off. You've become susceptible to the LubLub pollen!"

Knowing that Juni always had one spare portable dose on him for an emergency (this was a must in spying), Carmen began to frisk her brother. She grabbed him in a choke hold. Then she expertly patted his every pocket until finally, she located a capsule of slithering Anti-Snot Serum. Turning her choke hold into a Jaw-Dropping Clinch, Carmen dropped the green capsule down her brother's throat. Then she pushed him to the ground and made him sit still while the medicine took effect.

Luckily, the serum took less than a minute to enter Juni's system. Soon, he'd stopped sneezing and ceased snickering.

"Now, there's a mission to accomplish," Carmen said.

"Right," Juni said, hopping to his feet and turning back toward the Winesaps. "Let's go."

Juni began walking across the dirt road. But Carmen stayed rooted to her spot. In fact, when Juni stopped to peek at her, she was staring at him with wide eyes.

"What now?" he asked.

"That's it!" Carmen said, pointing at the medicine package on the ground. The tiny package had

a picture of a snake on it. "Snakes. The Garden of Ed N. Doesn't this sound a little familiar?"

"Now that you mention it, it does!" Juni said.

"Okay, so let's think," Carmen said. "What was found in the real Garden of Eden?"

"Besides fig leaves?" Juni said, frowning in confusion.

"Forbidden fruit!" Carmen declared. "Eating the forbidden fruit is enough to sober anyone up!"

"So, if we can just figure out where that forbidden fruit is," Juni said excitedly, "perhaps we can use it to snap these folks out of their foolishness."

"Exactly," Carmen said. "But here's the bigger question. What *is* the forbidden fruit? Something tells me it's not going to be anything as simple as an apple."

Both kids began to think. As they pondered, they gazed around them at the giddy grown-ups snapping up expensive art. They looked at the budding trees and the warm, setting sun. They watched their parents, frolicking in the wildflowers.

And suddenly, Carmen gasped.

"I have an idea," she said. "These folks have *Spring* Fever, right? So, what's the polar opposite of spring?"

"Fall?" Juni said.

"Exactly," Carmen declared. "If we can simulate fall, that might end this cursed craziness!"

"Great!" Juni cried. Then he frowned. "Uh, how do we simulate fall?"

"I have no idea," Carmen sighed. "Let's do a gadget check."

Quickly, the Spy Kids emptied their pockets onto the pollen-dusted dirt. They sorted through their laser cutters and Chameleocandy, Carmen's Snack-It-Back, and Juni's Make Like a Tree and Leave. They scoured every virtual corner of their spy watches. But in the search for a cool, crisp, autumnal solution, they came up cold.

"If only we had time to go home and consult our complete gadget stash," Juni complained. "I'm sure we could find a solution."

"There's no time for that," Carmen insisted. Then she glanced at the wildflower meadow, where Mom and Dad were still cartwheeling. "But there *are* two other gizmo carriers here."

"Are you suggesting that we take advantage of our parents' Spring Fever by going through their pockets?" Juni said, planting his hands on his hips. "That we totally invade their privacy?"

"Yes!" Carmen said, walking toward the field.

"Whoo-hoo!" Juni cried, bouncing after her. "I

guess there are some perks to this LubLub fiasco after all. You know Mom always keeps secret snacks in her purse."

"Hey," Carmen said, threateningly, "unless she's got some sort of icy food that can blow a cold front over this scene, then you can just forget about that for now, Snack Boy."

"Awww," Juni sighed. But there was no more time to complain. The Spy Kids had reached their parents—now immersed in a two-person game of ring-around-the-rosy. The younger Cortezes seized the grown-ups and began tickling them. Immediately, Mom and Dad collapsed in helpless giggles, giving their kids an opportunity to fish through their pockets and grab Mom's purse.

Soon, Carmen and Juni had all their parents' gadgets displayed before them.

"Man," Juni said, checking out a cute Hello Smitty pen-and-pencil set, assorted bubble wands, and a sticky lollipop. "Mom and Dad have gone completely juvenile. This kids stuff will be no help at all."

Carmen nodded morosely.

"There's only one remnant of our old, and responsible, parents here," she said, picking up a rectangular cardboard box. "Mom must have been

getting ready to do some laundry when she was struck by Spring Fever."

Juni glanced at the box. The label read: *Uncle Machete's Household Helper—Cool Breeze Dryer Sheets. They're so effective you don't even need the dryer!*

"Wait a minute . . ." Juni said, snatching the box away from his sister. "Cool breeze . . . you don't even need the dryer? Carmen—come with me!"

CHAPTER 13

Clutching the box of dryer sheets tightly, Juni began skulking through the tall wildflowers. Carmen followed suit. They ducked around feverish shoppers and scuttled under parked cars. Finally, they made it to the edge of Ed's garden without being spotted by Marty or Roberta. Whipping out a couple of automatic trowels, they dug a tunnel beneath the prickly shrubbery protecting the garden. Within two minutes, they'd made it inside, undetected!

Then they ran for the LubLub tree.

When Juni reached the spotty, lavender trunk, he pulled one of the fuzzy dryer sheets out of its box. He tossed the fragrant square up into the LubLub's leaves and then reached for another sheet.

"What the heck are you doing?" Carmen asked.

"If my hunch is right," Juni said, "I'm curing Spring Fever! Help me out here!"

With a shrug, Carmen grabbed a handful of dryer sheets out of Juni's box and began tossing them into the LubLub's branches herself. When the box was empty, the kids backed away from the tree.

They held their breath and watched.

"Look!" Carmen gasped after a suspenseful moment. She was pointing at a red blossom at the top of the tree. It was shriveling before the Spy Kids' very eyes! The lush, red petals were curling around their yellow centers, then dropping to the ground—dead.

Next, the shimmery, silvery LubLub leaves began to go brown and drop from their lavender branches. The pollen pods began to implode and fall into the dirt. Even the bark's bright, mossy spots went dull and gray.

The tree was lapsing into instant autumn!

And, just as it had spread Spring Fever, the LubLub now seemed to sense the start of fall. One by one, the nearby trees began to turn yellow and red, then brown, and finally altogether bare.

At the same time, the sunny sky went chilly and crisp.

Fall was spreading throughout the land!

And it seemed to be sucking the LubLub pollen

clean out of the air. As Carmen and Juni looked on in awe, several visitors to the Garden of Ed N. began shaking their heads blearily. Then they looked around, bewildered.

"Uh, what am I doing here?" a nearby man asked. "I'm supposed to be in a business meeting right now! I better call my boss!"

He dashed out of the garden.

The moms in the garden began to exclaim that they were late for their car pools and day-care pick-ups. A garbageman slapped his forehead, then began running toward the garbageless truck he'd parked carelessly in the dirt road.

Grinning at each other, the Spy Kids followed the suddenly-responsible adults out of the garden. They watched gleefully as *every* addled art lover in the area began to snap out of his or her Spring Fever.

As they quickly recovered their wits, the grown-ups began to realize what they'd just done. They'd traded their house payments, their heirloom jewels, their life savings for artwork that had been pillaged from Ed's beautiful garden.

"Hey," cried one man, racing up to the Winesaps' folding table. He handed them back a straw horse he'd just bought. "This is an outrage. I

want my money back," the man cried. He gestured at his empty pockets.

"Sorry, no refunds," Marty said nervously. He stuffed a giant wad of cash into his wallet and began folding up the table. "In fact, there will be no more sales, either. The Edlysian Fields Gallery At Large is now closed for business. You see, the wife and I are off to the tropics in a few hours. . . ."

"But, you've taken everything I have!" cried a woman, gazing in horror at the single peanut-butter jar in her hand. "What have I done? How will I feed my family?"

"Um, try peanut butter!" Marty suggested. Then he winked at Roberta, who was closing the moving truck's back hatch. She grinned back at her husband, then turned to the distraught art buyer.

"Or maybe you should try baking up a sucker pie," she taunted. "See ya!"

"I don't think so," Carmen called out. With her brother on her heels, she ran over to the evil art dealers. "Marty and Roberta Winesap, you're under arrest."

"By order of the OSS," Juni added.

"Let's go, Marty!" Roberta shrieked. The couple scrambled toward the truck's cab. But before they could climb into it, Carmen and Juni dived into

their path, blocking them with twin somersaults. Then the kids sprang to their feet and put up their dukes.

"Oh, please," Marty said, glaring down at the Spy Kids from his towering height. "You against us? Don't be fools."

"Sorry," Juni retorted. "That's the way it's going to be."

He glanced at Carmen and muttered, "Spy Maneuver #24-A."

"But that's an underwater maneuver," Carmen whispered in bewilderment.

"Exactly," Juni replied. He took a big gulp of air and held his breath.

Suddenly understanding what her brother was planning, Carmen puffed out her cheeks and caught her breath, too.

Then, in a seamlessly synchronized assault, the Spy Kids began slapping at their own arms and legs with all their strength.

"What's this?" Marty scowled. "More bad performance art? You should stick to your day jobs, kiddos."

Carmen and Juni ignored him—and kept slapping. And with each hit, great poofs of LubLub pollen popped out of their clothes. The yellow dust

rose into the air to form a single, thick cloud. Before the Winesaps could react, that cloud had enveloped them completely!

They sucked the pollen into their noses and down their throats. It wafted into their eyes and settled into their ears. It covered them so thickly that it completely overpowered their allergy medicine.

Roberta began to snort.

And Marty began to chortle.

Then Roberta plopped onto the dirt and began making a mud pie, while her husband started flitting around in a lead-footed display of ballet.

As swiftly as the rest of the crowd had come to its senses, the Winesaps had completely lost theirs! They had the worst case of Spring Fever yet—which made it very easy for the Spy Kids to cuff them!

"Yes!" Juni said, locking Marty's handcuffs into place while Carmen took care of Roberta. "We saved the day. Mission accomplished!"

"But you couldn't save my hair?"

Carmen and Juni jumped, then spun around. Their father was standing before them, clutching at his new, poodle haircut. Clearly, he, too, had returned to his old—if horrified—self.

"And what's this thing on my face?" Mom asked, gaping into a hand mirror at her fake mustache.

Before Carmen and Juni could start explaining, another sober grown-up joined their midst. He was scrubbing Magic Marker off his arms with an alcohol swab and smiling peacefully.

"Falls!" Carmen and Juni cried.

"So, you got over the fever, too," Juni said. "Congratulations."

Then he cringed and gazed beyond the artist at the garden itself. Ed's cutlery gate was squeaking on one hinge. The Popsicle-stick walkway was splintered. And the tower of peanut butter was leaning so much it was on the verge of collapse. The addled art fans had overrun the place, damaging it badly.

"Oh, wow," Juni said. "Your art, your refuge—it's totally been invaded. I'm so sorry."

"You know what?" Ed said, smoothing down his wild, gray hair. "Don't be. This whole Spring Fever thing has got me thinking. The Winesaps would never have had a reason to pilfer my art if I had just let people come here and enjoy it. That's what art is all about, isn't it? Releasing a bit of beauty into the world—and not hoarding it for yourself."

"Releasing art into the world is definitely better than releasing LubLub pollen," Juni agreed. "That even goes for performance art!"

"Careful what you wish for, Juni," Carmen said

with a wry grin. She suddenly pulled a tool out of her cargo-pant pocket. It was Uncle Machete's Everything Outdoors Morph-a-Gadget. Pressing a button, Carmen turned the gizmo into an ax.

"You see," the Spy Girl told her grinning audience, "I thought I'd treat you all to a little modern dance. This is a performance piece I'd like to call 'Chopping Down a LubLub Tree for Firewood'!"

The Cortez family is ready to enjoy the warm weather and fresh air—all of them except Juni. It seems that this Spy Kid is having a major attack of allergies. While he tries to avoid sneezing, his family seems happy to avoid doing anything—including spying! After Juni discovers the reason behind his family's laziness, it is up to him and his sister to stop a man intent on taking over the world, one sneeze at a time.

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ISBN 0-7868-0989-2

00989>

7 25961 00499 6 UPC

$4.99 US/$6.99 CAN

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Cover design by Mecca Studios

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